



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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(Hansard)
and
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Bell, Jonathan (Strangford)
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)
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Ó hOisín, Cathal (East Londonderry)
O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)
Overend, Mrs Sandra (Mid Ulster)
Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)
Ramsey, Pat (Foyle)
Ramsey, Ms Sue (West Belfast)
Ritchie, Ms Margaret (South Down)
Robinson, George (East Londonderry)
Robinson, Peter (East Belfast)
Ross, Alastair (East Antrim)
Ruane, Ms Caitríona (South Down)
Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)
Spratt, Jimmy (South Belfast)
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)
Weir, Peter (North Down)
Wells, Jim (South Down)
Wilson, Sammy (East Antrim)

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Principal Deputy Speaker	Mr Francie Molloy MLA
Deputy Speakers.....	Mr Roy Beggs MLA Mr John Dallat MLA
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Ministerial Offices

The Executive Committee

First Minister	Mr Peter Robinson
Deputy First Minister	Mr Martin McGuinness <i>(Until 19 September 2011)</i>
Acting deputy First Minister	Mr John O'Dowd <i>(From 20 September 2011)</i>
Minister for Employment and Learning	Dr Stephen Farry
Minister for Regional Development	Mr Danny Kennedy
Minister for Social Development	Mr Nelson McCausland
Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.....	Mrs Michelle O'Neill
Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure.....	Ms Carál Ní Chuilín
Minister of Education.....	Mr John O'Dowd
Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.....	Mrs Arlene Foster
Minister of Finance and Personnel.....	Mr Sammy Wilson
Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.....	Mr Edwin Poots
Minister of Justice.....	Mr David Ford
Minister of the Environment	Mr Alex Attwood

Junior Ministers

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister	Ms Martina Anderson Mr Jonathan Bell
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Official Report (Hansard)

Assembly Sitings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 12 September 2011

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I ask for your guidance and information on some matters relating to the business of the House. It is more than four months since the Executive came to office, yet no indication has been made to me, as a Member, of any prospect of any plan for how they propose to govern through a published Programme for Government. I ask that you, as Speaker of the House —

Mr Speaker: Before you say any more, I must tell you that that is not a point of order. That is clearly a matter for the Executive, not for the Assembly. The Member may disagree with me on that, but in this House, at this minute, that is not a point of order. I ask the Member not to proceed down that road and to consider where he may end up.

Mr Allister: You did not hear my question. It was whether you, as Speaker, have any information as to when we might expect a Programme for Government.

Mr Speaker: Let me impress upon the Member as clearly as I can that that is not a point of order. It is not an appropriate point of order for the House. I will now move on.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is on a different matter: the business of the House and the level of deference shown to the House. Yet again, a matter that should have been announced to the House, namely the important statement on tuition fees, was directed publicly to the media several days before any statement to the House. Have you, as Speaker, any view about what that does to the standing of the House?

The third matter that I want to raise is whether you have any information as to when, if at all, the House will receive a statement from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP)

about the review that was supposedly carried out on special advisers?

Mr Speaker: I will take your first point of order first. I always encourage Ministers to come to the House before they go to the press. However, on that particular issue, the Executive took their decision and the Minister made a very brief statement to the press.

I received a letter on Thursday at 5.00 pm, which noted the Minister's clear indication to come to the House with a further statement. Therefore, on this occasion, I believe that the Minister acted appropriately. I agree with the Member that there have been occasions on which Ministers have been inclined to go to the press before coming to the House. However, on this occasion, the Minister acted appropriately in going to the press with a brief statement and then coming to the House with a further and wider statement. I believe that the Minister in question, Dr Farry, acted in an appropriate manner.

Sorry, what was your second point of order Mr Allister?

Mr Allister: It was whether there was any indication of a statement from DFP on the supposed review carried out on special advisers.

Mr Speaker: It is a matter for the Executive and for individual Ministers as to when they come to the House with statements. The Member will know that all I can do is to encourage Ministers to come to the House with statements as frequently as possible. However, on all occasions, it is up to Ministers, and the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, to determine when to come to the House with any statement on any matter. That is not really the job of the Speaker. All I can do is to encourage Ministers to come to the House with statements at appropriate times.

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Royal Assent

Damages (Asbestos-related Conditions) Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: We will now move on to the next item of business, and I welcome all Members back after the summer break. I wish to inform Members that two Bills have received Royal Assent. The Budget (No. 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 and the Damages (Asbestos-related Conditions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. Both became law on 25 July 2011.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Trade and Business Development

Mr Speaker: The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment wishes to make a statement to the House.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, regarding the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in trade and business development sectoral format. The meeting was held in the offices of the North/South Ministerial Council in Armagh on Monday 25 July 2011. The Executive were represented by me in my capacity as the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and by John O'Dowd MLA, the Minister of Education. The Irish Government were represented by Richard Bruton TD, Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. This statement has been agreed with the Minister of Education, and I make it on behalf of us both.

The Council received a presentation from the chairperson of InterTradelreland, David Dobbin, and its CEO, Liam Nellis, about its performance and business activities. Ministers discussed progress on the development of InterTradelreland's corporate plan 2011-13 and its business plan 2011.

The main focus of the meeting was a discussion on co-operation on innovation. InterTradelreland has specifically dedicated resources to increase collaborative participation on the EU research, technological development and innovation framework programme, and it has established a steering group to increase such collaboration. The Council noted the success of the Collaborate to Innovate conference, which was held in Belfast on 30 June and which aimed to increase co-operative participation in current and forthcoming EU framework programmes. Ministers also welcomed the continuing success and development of the US-Ireland research and development partnership, and the initiation of a study to determine the characteristics of an innovation ecosystem across Northern Ireland and Ireland. InterTradelreland's draft annual report and accounts for 2010 were also noted.

The Council noted a number of additional matters, including Tourism Ireland's annual report and

accounts 2010 and a determination that was made by the board of Tourism Ireland on the remuneration on its chief executive. The resignation of Mr Hugh Friel from the board of Tourism Ireland Limited was noted, and Ministers thanked him for his contribution as chairperson. They also approved the appointments of Mrs Ann Riordan as chairperson of Tourism Ireland Limited and Mr Jim Flannery as its director.

The Council agreed to meet again in trade and business development sectoral format on a date to be confirmed. I commend the statement to the Assembly.

Mr A Maginness (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment):

I thank the Minister for her report. I note, in particular, that InterTradeIreland has specifically dedicated resources to increase collaborative participation on the EU research, technological development and innovation framework programme, and that a steering group has been set up. That is a very important development. When does the Minister see the steering group getting down to work and bearing fruit by increasing collaboration, which is essential to accessing EU funding in this area?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Chairperson for his question. I very much hope that the steering group is already down to work. The conference that was held in Belfast in June was really a signpost to action. As you know, we have been working hard on framework programme (FP) 7 to try to get as many small companies, in particular, to work together along with universities to try to access the huge amount of funding that is available to us from Europe. As a result of the conference, we felt that it was necessary to set up the steering group to get more and more out of Europe.

As the Member knows, we have moved on to look at the next framework. If I am correct, it is not being called FP8 but Vision 2020. I was quite comfortable with it being called FP8, because I could remember that. It is vital that we not only continue to draw down money but obtain more money. Indeed, the economic strategy for Northern Ireland that is being developed very much puts an onus on research and development and innovation, and the commercialisation of that research and development and innovation. At the next sectoral meeting, we will have a report on how the steering group is taking those matters forward.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for her statement. I agree with the Chair of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment that the formation of the research and technological development innovation framework programme is very important. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that we involve small and medium-sized enterprises in the work that will be done under that programme to increase collaboration and that we ensure that those organisations have much the same opportunities to engage in research and development as larger organisations?

Mrs Foster: Yes. I thank the Member for his question. Part of the difficulty in the past has been the question of scale and the bureaucracy and amount of form filling that has to be done before money is able to be drawn down from Europe. Indeed, when Máire Geoghegan-Quinn visited earlier this year, she heard that point time and time again from me and, indeed, from many business leaders from across Northern Ireland. It is vital that InterTradeIreland continues its work with small businesses. InterTradeIreland is already working very closely with small businesses across Northern Ireland through its Acumen, Innova and Fusion programmes. All those programmes are designed to work with small and medium-sized businesses. It is important for me as Minister that small businesses begin to move on to the next stage of drawing down those European funds.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome the increased progress on collaboration and co-operation on an all-Ireland basis, particularly with regard to tourism. Following the appointment of the new chairperson and director of Tourism Ireland, what are that new management structure's main priorities, apart from the drive to increase golf tourism in Ireland over the next year?

Mrs Foster: During the meeting, there was only a very brief mention of Tourism Ireland because it was, of course, a trade and sectoral business meeting. However, I am happy to answer the question. The chairperson who has been put in is just an interim chairperson until the new chairperson can be appointed. The new director is also in place. Just last week, I announced a £12 million advertising campaign to draw more people into Northern Ireland. As the Member will know, next year is a huge year for tourism in Northern Ireland. The year 2012 is a signature

year across Northern Ireland. Therefore, I am challenging all the tourism industries, whether the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board or Tourism Ireland, on how we can give stand out to Northern Ireland across the world and take advantage of 2012.

12.15 pm

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for bringing the joint statement to the House. Did the presentation by InterTradelreland include an assessment of whether Her Majesty's Treasury's contribution of £7 billion to the bailout of the Irish economy brought any benefit to Northern Ireland's exporters, or are we suffering as much as everyone else?

Mrs Foster: The Member mentioned two different areas, and he may want to direct that question to the Minister of Finance and Personnel when he makes his statement. The Member is aware of our position on exports, and that it will be a major driver for us over the coming years. In the past, many small companies used the Republic of Ireland as a test bed for exporting products before they went into the wider world. There have been problems there, including difficulties arising from the Republic of Ireland's sovereign debt crisis and the reduction of available money across Northern Ireland and the Republic. Some of our firms have had difficulties in gaining money from some companies in Southern Ireland but we are working very hard at ways to innovate to get exports to the Republic of Ireland.

An example of that can be seen in the way that the Superquinn issue was dealt with. I intervened directly when the Musgrave Group took over Superquinn to ensure that small businesses in Northern Ireland were not disadvantaged by the takeover. That has turned into a good-news story, because the Musgrave Group has said that it will guarantee that suppliers in Northern Ireland that worked with Superquinn will continue to do so. I see this as an opportunity to increase the market share for Northern Irish companies in the Republic of Ireland, and I will support them in that.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her statement. Have discussions taken place about how we can learn from the experience of the Republic in how to orientate our research and development offering, particularly in view of the anticipated

reduction in corporation tax, which may well stimulate activity in that area?

Mrs Foster: If the reduction in corporation tax comes about, there will be more focus on Northern Ireland as a place to do research and development. However, even now, a lot of companies from across the world come initially to do research and development in Northern Ireland and proceed with the commercialisation of what they are able to discover. That is used to bring more investment into Northern Ireland. We have seen that happen with American companies, which first bring about five or 10 people to Northern Ireland and then come up with a 50- or 60-person proposition.

The Member said that we could learn from the Republic of Ireland about research and development. However, there are other countries across Europe that we could also learn from, particularly some of the smaller Eastern European countries, which seem to be able to do this very well. Although we will look at all that happens, we certainly will not just look to the Republic of Ireland for learning on research and development.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her statement. What measures have been put in place to stop the duplication of work between InterTradelreland and Invest Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: That is the first issue that I took up with the board of InterTradelreland when I had my first meeting with its board. There is absolutely no point in InterTradelreland doing the same job for Northern Ireland companies as Invest Northern Ireland. I am glad to say that there has been progress because a lot of the programmes that have been developed by InterTradelreland are specifically engineered to deal with companies with 10 staff or fewer, so it is adding value to the work that Invest Northern Ireland does here, and that is continuing. Meetings take place between the chief executives of Invest Northern Ireland and InterTradelreland to ensure that duplication does not happen. We are dealing with public funds, and therefore we need to proceed in the most appropriate way.

Mr Cree: I also thank the Minister for her statement. She mentioned the Collaborate to Innovate conference that was held at the end of June, and said that it was very successful. Will she explain how that success is measured and quantified?

Mrs Foster: On the day of the conference, there was the fact that there were so many academic institutions from across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and businesses of all sizes there and that they were able to network. I am happy to share with the Member the list of people who attended the conference.

Obviously, we will know about the output of the conference at a later stage, because it takes a while for networks to develop into propositions and propositions to move into applications to FP7. However, I am satisfied that the conference was successful and that we shall see its outworkings in the future.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the statement, Minister, and thank you for all of your efforts on the economic front. However, when I talk to some business interests, they tell me that we could do more, and perhaps your reference to Superquinn and Musgrave shows that there are opportunities to do more. Are we pushing InterTradelreland as much as we can, or are we just in a low gear? What can we do to push forward with North/South developments in trade, business and, basically, in growing jobs here?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. I think if he was to speak to some of the executives in InterTradelreland they would think that they were getting pushed enough. However, I will continue to push at them, because I think that there are some developments that are coming across to me at present about a level of protectionism that is growing up in the Republic of Ireland. That is something that we need to challenge at all times. In a free market, we need to be able to allow our companies to export into the Republic of Ireland, and it is therefore something on which I will keep a close eye, and I will challenge InterTradelreland to make sure that it does not happen.

Mr Allister: Minister, there have been many of those structured cross-border meetings with the Republic about trade, investment and all things economic. In contrast, can you tell us how many times since coming to office that you have met with UK trade Ministers to help enhance the indigenous, internal trade of the United Kingdom? Would the perceived imbalance not be one of those things that encourages the sort of nonsense that we had to listen to from your colleagues in the Waterfront Hall this weekend about the supposed economic advantages of Irish unity?

Mr Speaker: Order. I continually say to the whole House that questions need to be on the particular statement, not on a wide issue or other issues that are outside the statement. I want to remind the whole House.

Mr Allister: With respect, Mr Speaker, I said, in light of the imbalance, what impact does it have? On a more specific matter, the Minister approved or noted the salary now paid to the —

Mr Speaker: Order. I really must insist that the Member should come to his question. We should not have long statements around a question, and I insist that the Member comes to his question.

Mr Allister: I would if I could.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has already asked a question, and I am going to ask the Member to stay in his seat until the Minister answers the question.

Mrs Foster: I do not know if the Member was watching RTÉ all weekend — I certainly was not — but I do not think he would have seen any of my party colleagues in the Waterfront Hall. First of all he asks me a question, and then he says, “In light of the imbalance”, so he is actually trying to answer the question before I have answered it. The reality is that the Republic of Ireland is an export market for Northern Ireland, and the rest of the UK is not an export market for Northern Ireland, because it is the same market. He needs to understand that. Of course, I talk to my colleagues in Westminster in relation to the matter, and I am quite happy to give the Member any of the details that he requires, because I am sure he is very well aware that questions can be put to the Minister in writing.

North/South Ministerial Council: Special EU Programmes

Mr Speaker: I have been informed by the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement to the House.

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): The North/South Ministerial Council met in special EU programmes sectoral format in Armagh on 18 July 2011.

The Council last met in that format in January 2011. Michael Noonan TD, the Republic of Ireland's Minister for Finance, chaired the 18 July meeting, accompanied by Brendan Howlin TD, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. I represented Northern Ireland, accompanied by junior Minister Martina Anderson.

The Council noted that the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) will continue with its current complement of 65 staff in 2011 and 2012, falling to a number in the fifties in 2013 and a number in the forties the following year. The Council agreed that a further staffing review would be completed at the end of 2012 to confirm the precise numbers. It also discussed the Special EU Programmes Body's work in progress to develop its corporate plan for 2011-13 and its business plan and budget for 2011. Those are likely to be presented for Council approval in September 2011. Mr Pat Colgan, the chief executive of SEUPB, updated the Council on how SEUPB's work had progressed since January 2011.

The Council also noted that the closure of the 2000-06 Peace II and INTERREG IIIa programmes is nearing completion. The Peace II programme was fully committed, with a total expenditure of around £820 million. The total expenditure on INTERREG IIIa was around £162 million. The Council noted progress on implementing the current Peace III and INTERREG IVa programmes. As of 30 April 2011, Peace III had approved 144 projects, worth some £225 million. At the end of May 2011, INTERREG IVa had approved 56 projects, worth approximately £147 million.

The Council noted that Peace III had spent £70 million in total and was therefore close to achieving its 2011 spending target of £74 million. In contrast, INTERREG IVa had spent £43 million, compared with a target of £55 million. INTERREG's spending performance reflects, in part, somewhat slower progress

in committing the programme's funds. SEUPB assured the Council that there was no risk to achieving this year's INTERREG spending target of £55 million and that the 2012 target was also likely to be achieved. However, the body reported a significant risk to achieving targets in 2013 and 2014. SEUPB advised that it is managing that risk and that it will work closely with officials from the relevant Departments to ensure that all future targets are achieved. The Council noted that local authority-based groups have had 19 projects approved, worth some £22 million under INTERREG IVa. A further batch of local applications in the policy areas of enterprise and tourism are under assessment, with the first approvals likely in the autumn.

SEUPB informed the Council that the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) had recently completed its first estimate of community uptake under the Peace III programme. Based on the funding allocated to date — approximately half of the Peace III budget — NISRA estimated the Protestant community uptake at 46% and the Catholic community uptake at 54%. SEUPB noted that that was an interim analysis and that a further estimate would be commissioned later in the life of the programme, when more funding had been allocated.

The Council noted that SEUPB continues to facilitate North/South participation in the INTERREG IV transnational and inter-regional programmes. To date, 51 projects with Northern Ireland partners have successfully applied for funding across the four programmes for which Northern Ireland is eligible. The Council noted that SEUPB continues to communicate the positive impacts of the EU programmes through high-profile publicity events, many with ministerial involvement. Recent events have included the launch of the Ilex peace bridge in Londonderry on 25 June 2011. A major seminar on the INTERREG IVa programme is planned for later this year.

12.30 pm

The Council noted that, in keeping with its statutory remit, SEUPB will offer advice to assist in the preparation of programmes for the new EU programme period 2014-2020. It was agreed that the Council would meet again in Special EU Programmes sectoral format in October or November this year.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and for the opportunity to discuss it with him earlier.

I am sure that the Minister will share my concern, which is in the report, about the risks to achieving the spending targets in 2013 and 2014. Can he reassure us that everything possible is being done to work with SEUPB and all other partners to ensure that that risk is reduced as far as possible? That leads to a discussion about future Peace and INTERREG funding in the 2014-2020 period, given that that underspend will have a negative influence on securing additional funding. What is his Department doing to promote the cause for additional Peace funding and enhanced INTERREG funding from 2014 to 2020?

Mr Wilson: The Chairperson rightly identified that any underspend would weaken the case for applying for funds for the 2014-2020 period, and, given the profile of present INTERREG IVa spending, it is estimated that there could be a substantial underspend. Of course, much of that spending is on construction projects, so, given that we are trying to eke out as much capital spending as we can, it is essential to our economy. So, it is important. We have been through the issues as to why there have been delays. In some cases, it was because projects did not come forward quickly enough. Sometimes, even when money has been allocated, there has been slowness in getting it spent, and, sometimes, there have been delays in getting programmes approved when there has been input from Departments on, for example, business cases. That multiplicity of reasons has to be addressed. SEUPB has assured us that it will address them, and my officials will push it on that.

The future programme, of course, will be taken forward by the UK Government, and we have already had discussions with officials. Indeed, my officials are in regular contact with London officials — almost on a weekly basis. We would like a commitment from the UK Government in the autumn on pushing for spending beyond 2014. The Irish Government have indicated that they are supportive. The Westminster Government have indicated support for this, but I suppose that it is a case of timing as to when they make it known to Europe that they intend to push for further spending after 2014.

Mr Speaker: I remind the House that, apart from the Chairperson of the Committee, Members should ask one question to the Minister on the statement; they should certainly not make further statements. In addition, the question must relate to the statement. If Members go outside the statement, they will be asked to take their seat, and I will move on to the next Member.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his statement to the House. I appreciate that he gave figures showing 54% funding to the Roman Catholic community and 46% to the Protestant community. What mechanism is SEUPB putting in place to address the imbalance in funding? I appreciate that money is getting to the ground, but I would like to ensure that a fair process is in place so that the Protestant community capitalises on money coming from Europe.

Mr Wilson: In previous statements to the House, I have made it clear that that issue has been raised at all the sectoral meetings. I will give a word of caution about the figures that we presented today. We are about halfway through the programme, and approximately half the money has been allocated. Of the half that is yet to be allocated, about 60% of applications are from what would be called the Protestant community. Therefore, on the basis of the imbalance in the applications still to be dealt with, I expect the percentage to go up.

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

The figures of 46% and 54% are distorted a little by the fact that one of the big projects on which £8 million was spent, the Ilex bridge in Londonderry, would have been attributed mostly to the Catholic community. Had that been taken out, it would have been about 50:50. Nevertheless, there always was an imbalance in Peace I and Peace II. So far, the situation has improved with Peace III. A lot of outreach work has been done. In my constituency, many organisations such as community groups, the Orange Order etc have acknowledged that the SEUPB is talking to them to try to encourage them to put forward programmes and projects. Hopefully, that will help to remove the past imbalance.

Mr Cree: I also thank the Minister. I trust that he is keeping the pressure on Mr Colgan. I am concerned about the end of the current period: we must spend the money, otherwise we will be in a very weak position to negotiate an extension.

Will he update us on the Maze project and the £20 million that has been earmarked for that? Is that in the current lot of projects?

Mr Wilson: I do not have the details of all of the projects that are still to be evaluated. I cannot remember, but I think that about 61 projects are to be evaluated and are being looked at. I do not have the details of all those projects, but I will write to the Member about the one that he mentioned.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Was there any discussion at the meeting of the use of SEUPB funding by certain victims' groups? Will the Minister update the House on that issue?

Mr Wilson: Since the groups to which, I presume, the Member is referring are still under investigation, he knows that it would be totally inappropriate for me to make any comment on that.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for the statement and the update. My question follows on from what was said on the other side of the House. Given that Peace III funding is premised on shared future objectives, does the Minister agree that statistics that focus solely on uptake in a shared-out manner, i.e. Protestant versus Catholic, is unhelpful and that it would be better to assess Peace III on the basis of outcomes that are focused on integration?

Mr Wilson: There are not pockets of money in Peace III for one community or the other. Projects are assessed on the basis of their attractiveness, what is being presented and the case that is made for them. However, one has to recognise that, in a society as divided as ours, there always will be some focus on the way in which the funds have been allocated. If there are communities that should benefit from Peace money but do not, we should look at the size of the problem and at what can be done to deal with it.

It is very odd to hear this from the Alliance Party. I have said time and again that I want to see us move away from the focus on how many Catholics are employed and how many Protestants are employed. The party from which the lady comes was the very one that promoted the Fair Employment Commission, the Equality Commission and all the quangos that delve into that all the time. It has permeated our whole

society. I find the question a wee bit odd from her, especially since her party seems to be the one that most wants to promote the bodies that delve into that and dabble their fingers in it regularly.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his statement. How will the SEUPB ensure that all future targets are met in 2013 and 2014?

Mr Wilson: This afternoon, I have been open with the Assembly that there are difficulties, especially with the INTERREG IVa money. First, SEUPB is well enough resourced to deal with that. Secondly, it is aware that there is a problem, and, thirdly, it is aware of the issues that may have caused that problem. My officials will work with SEUPB, Departments and the bodies that are funded to ensure that we do not have that shortfall. It may well be that we have to look at some mechanisms for dealing with that, perhaps introducing some bigger projects, which will ensure that the funds are soaked up. The important point is that those projects have to stack up. We will not spend money for the sake of spending it. They will have to be projects that meet the criteria that are laid down and make some contribution.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Basil McCrea.

Mr B McCrea: On this occasion, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will pass.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the figures that the Minister has announced today on the improvement in distribution inequity, although he did give a health warning on that. The Minister will be aware that, in the Protestant, unionist and loyalist community, weak applications have come in because of a lack of competence, confidence and capacity. As we, hopefully, move forward to Peace IV, what will the Minister ensure will happen to ensure that that capacity is improved?

Mr Wilson: I am really glad that I have left the Member for Lagan Valley without a word to say. That is an unusual situation for him, but it is good to see that he is in that position. Hopefully, that will happen more frequently during this session of the Assembly.

The Member for North Belfast asked what can be done to help groups. If we say that we have to build capacity to allow people to make more robust and competent applications, we

are probably approaching the issue from the wrong direction. On some occasions, we should ask SEUPB, “What can you do with the system so that people do not have to have all that expertise to make applications? Why do the applications have to be so convoluted? Why does the information have to be addressed in a certain way, and why do you need almost a new language to make some of the applications?”. The Member is quite right: that gives an unfair advantage to people who have become application junkies and who know how to do the job and have done so many times before.

The first thing that I would say to SEUPB is, “Can you make the process a bit easier for people so that they do not require a huge degree of expertise?” It should really be doing that at this stage. Of course, there are ways in which some help can be given, and perhaps some of the organisations themselves should look at that. Last week, I spoke to a group, and it seems that, although there are lots of groups associated with it, they never shared any information on what was done to make a successful application. That expertise remained with the group that had made a successful application rather than being spread around the associated groups.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Minister for his statement. He said that the body reported a significant risk to the achievement of targets in 2013 and 2014. Is the Minister aware that it has taken considerable time to process applications to decision stage? I have written to him about that. It is having a detrimental impact on the outcome of potential projects that could bring about economic regeneration at a time of economic downturn and when challenges are being faced by local communities.

Mr Wilson: I am aware of that, and I think that I made that clear in answers to previous questions. Some of that may be due to the complicated procedure in making the applications and the information that groups are required to get. They have to get consultants to do work for them, and there is slowness in SEUPB. Of course, they sometimes argue that, when business cases go to Departments, they can be slowed down there as well. There is a host of reasons for it, and my officials are working with SEUPB to ensure that we do not have the kind of shortfall that I have highlighted to the Assembly this morning.

12.45 pm

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his statement. Given the community imbalance, does he anticipate a further programme and, perhaps, a potential change of direction for Peace funding?

Mr Wilson: I have given information to the Assembly this morning that there was some distortion because of the £8 million for the Ilex bridge. About half of the programme funding is still to be allocated, and about 60% of the applications will come from what is broadly described as the Protestant community. I hope that the final figure will be much more balanced than the figure that I gave this morning.

I have found no resistance — in fact, I have found great support — from Ministers in the Irish Republic, who have also made it clear at the sectoral meetings that they expect SEUPB to ensure that funding is allocated on a basis that is seen to cover all the community. I want to make this point: I do not wish to see quotas for the money. I have resisted that time and again, and I hate the whole equality industry that has grown up in Northern Ireland. However, in unionist areas, such as the one that I represent, there are groups that could benefit from Peace money and could do a good job with it and make a difference in their area, but they are perhaps not getting it at present. I want to remove the barriers — whether those groups believe that they will not get it so do not bother applying, or whether it is a matter of the difficulties that were referred to by the Member for North Belfast — so that the funding can go to the communities that deserve it and to the communities that should qualify for it anyway.

Mr Nesbitt: I welcome the Minister’s statement. Following on from his last comment, my question is about NISRA estimates on Peace III. Does the Council take any view on whether the Peace III criteria favour one community over the other? The Protestant/unionist/loyalist community is seen to be quite badly fractured, and, indeed, there may be so many factions within it that they need to reach out to each other before they can meaningfully engage in cross-community dialogue, which is at the core of Peace III. That issue needs to be addressed urgently.

Mr Wilson: I am not aware of and no one has drawn to my attention any criteria that impact in the way that the Member has suggested. I can

think of some examples where money has been allocated to what are called — here is some more Peace III jargon — single identity groups. It is felt that money needs to be spent to enable them to get on the first step and to do exactly what the Member has suggested. So, I do not know that that is an impediment or, indeed, that the criteria create that impediment.

Mrs D Kelly: How many of the INTERREG IVa projects are linked to job creation? Has there been any appraisal of why there has not been as much spend as people had targeted and whether match funding is a problem for people trying to realise the potential of that fund?

Mr Wilson: First, all the spend will, to one extent or another, be job-creating, whether that is in the construction of projects or in the employment of people who run the projects. So, spending money will, by definition, create employment.

As I have said in previous answers, I do not think that any one impediment or barrier has been identified. A range of issues has been identified, right from the beginning of the process, from the quality of the applications to the assessment of the applications and, sometimes, when the money has been allocated, the slowness in starting to spend it. To me, that is an odd situation, especially at a time when you would have thought it would be easy to get firms to tender for work. However, throughout the process, we find examples of delays for all the reasons that I have given.

Mr Allister: Did the Minister take the opportunity of the Council reviewing staffing matters in the SEUPB to raise the gross disparity in the community backgrounds of SEUPB staff? If not, why not, given that this has been worsening, to the point at which a recent reply from him confirmed that, of the 49 staff employed in SEUPB offices in Northern Ireland, only 14 — two in seven — come from the Protestant community? That is a wholly unacceptable statistic, and, with the remainder of the staff employed in Monaghan, the overall picture is so much worse. So, did the Minister take the opportunity to raise the persistent failure to address and to better the representation of the Protestant community in the staffing complement of SEUPB? Might there just be a nexus between that and the disparity —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Will the Member come to a question?

Mr Wilson: First, I am surprised that the Member raised that question, because, in times past, he and I would have taken the same view, the view that I expressed here today: I am sick and tired of all this equality industry, which insists that you select people for employment on the basis of their religious or community background. I want to see the best people for the job doing the job. On occasions past, I remember going with the Member to the Fair Employment Agency, as it then was, and berating the unfortunate Bob Cooper for his obsession with community background, percentages and everything else, so there seems to be a bit of a turnaround.

Secondly, my big concern is to ensure that cross-border bodies of this nature are not bloated and do not grow and that they use the staff they have efficiently. That is why I concentrated on saying, “Do you need that number of staff? Are there efficiencies which can be achieved? And let’s have a programme of reducing the number of staff, so that we have a more lean, more efficient organisation”. That was my chief emphasis.

If the Member has evidence that people applied for and were refused jobs in SEUPB because of their community background, that is a different matter, but, if he thinks that I will go down the route of saying that there must be a certain percentage of Catholics and of Protestants, regardless of their qualifications or their ability to do the job, he has the wrong person.

Mr Allister: You do not care. Two in seven do not matter.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That concludes questions on his statement to the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Higher Education and Student Finance

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I am grateful for this opportunity to address the House on the future for higher education (HE) in Northern Ireland and tuition fees. As indicated last week, the higher education funding deal agreed by the Executive last Thursday is an extremely good news story for Northern Ireland. Our student representatives and others have already gone on record to commend the decision. It is important that we recognise that this deal is not about students in isolation but about our economic recovery and the future prosperity of Northern Ireland, to which our students and universities are so critical.

Members will recall that we were here just before the summer recess to debate a motion that the Committee for Employment and Learning tabled on higher education funding. During that debate, I was given a very clear message. That message, which was delivered on a cross-party basis, was that tuition fees should not be increased. Furthermore, the strong consensus was that I should go to the Executive to seek the necessary resources to make up the very significant funding shortfall to my Department that would arise from adopting such a position on tuition fees in Northern Ireland.

It may be helpful if I take a few minutes to remind Members of the financial position facing my Department. To address extant pressures, my Department needs to achieve savings of £150 million annually by 2014-15. Some £68 million of those savings have been targeted at the higher education sector, and that sum is proportionate to the level of investment in the HE sector relative to other Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) business areas. The sector is contributing £28 million in cash savings over the next two years by way of a 12% reduction in the teaching and research grant. In addition, it is addressing internal pressures associated with, for example, pay and price inflation, VAT, National Insurance contributions and pensions, and it is absorbing other reductions in income associated with the cessation or reduction of specific funding streams for innovation and research. The balance of that £68 million was expected to be funded by an increase in tuition fees. The decision to hold fees at their current level, with inflationary increases only, therefore means that the balance of the £68 million cash reduction — £40 million — has to be found from other measures. I will come to that shortly.

Funding decisions in England will see English universities charging fees of up to £9,000 from next September. Those fees will help to offset the reduction of around 80% in the core teaching grant that is currently allocated to English universities and will bring increased income into the sector in England, which is estimated at 10% over the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period.

In England and Wales, fees have been used to shift the balance of funding between government and the service user. An increase in fees in Northern Ireland was a viable option that merited consideration by my Department. It would have allowed additional revenue to be brought in outside the context of the block grant and would have avoided the otherwise inevitable decisions to reprioritise resources within the overall Northern Ireland Budget. However, in Northern Ireland, we wanted to take a different approach: one that continues to maintain the current balance between public funding and user contribution. That balance reflects the Executive's priority of growing the local economy through maximising participation in higher education and recognising the critical role that our local universities play in producing graduates with the necessary skills to meet existing and new economic opportunities, as well as recognising their centrality to research and development in Northern Ireland.

As I indicated, there is no support for significant increases in the fees charged here. Therefore, arising from the local political consensus against above-inflation rises in fees, the clear consequence is that the resultant funding gap has to be addressed. That gap will be £15 million, £30 million and £40 million in each of the three forthcoming financial years, and the final figure will then become a recurring annual pressure. Those are hugely challenging issues, and it has required significant effort to bring us to an acceptable solution. I am grateful to my Executive colleagues for the leadership and foresight that they have shown. By agreeing to take a collective approach to higher education funding, they have recognised the economic importance of investing in higher education and supporting efforts to raise skills here and, in particular, to provide a critical mass of highly skilled graduates.

The decisions reached by the Executive last week mean that I can now confirm that higher education tuition fees for local students in

Northern Ireland will be kept at current levels, subject only to inflationary increases, and that a funding package has been put in place to address the resultant budgetary pressures while ensuring the sustainable funding of the higher education sector. My overarching concerns are to ensure that Northern Ireland continues to have a world-class higher education system and that access to university is not determined by the ability to pay.

As we look to grow our economy and to take full advantage of the economic opportunities coming our way in the near future, it is critical that we support and recognise the role that higher education plays in producing skilled graduates and in research and development.

1.00 pm

Today's announcement on tuition fees and funding for higher education demonstrates that we are delivering on those policies and commitments. These decisions are a clear indication that the Executive are working for Northern Ireland — for our future students and graduates, for their families and for the wider economy. Furthermore, that commitment to skills, research and development and a knowledge-based economy is a clear signal to potential investors and others that Northern Ireland is open for business.

Of course, these decisions are not without pain, nor are they without risk. I have agreed that my Department will provide leadership in addressing the funding deficit through shouldering a significant proportion of the burden. In the 2014-15 financial year, my Department and the higher education sector will find £22 million to meet that pressure. That will be done without any further reductions to the critical front line services provided by my Department, including further education, skills in industry, apprenticeships and the employment service, beyond those anticipated in my savings plans. That £22 million includes a further £5 million contribution from the higher education sector, already factored in through discussions with the universities. A considerable element of that will be financed by charging higher fees to students from England, Scotland and Wales. The remaining £17 million pressure will be addressed through my Department's generating further internal savings in addition to those initially required for Budget 2010, and from money that I had identified for what would

have been higher notional loan subsidy costs for students in the event that above-inflation increases in tuition fees had been introduced.

I had initially considered using the savings resulting from the notional loan subsidy to provide for a larger expansion of student places, but the Executive felt that it was financially prudent to assess the actual distortions in student flows, and to consider additional resources in due course. In addition, the £22 million contribution is partially offset by £3 million coming from the Executive to my Department to allow us to begin to address the inescapable pressure on student places locally that will arise from having different fee regimes in different parts of the United Kingdom.

The balance of the overall £40 million pressure and the initial investment in additional student places will be met by other Departments, with the exception of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education, and the Department of Justice, and from a review of the education maintenance allowance. I fully acknowledge the implications and pain for the other Ministers and Departments as their budgets are adjusted to enable the Executive to contribute collectively to the funding deficit that arises from the decision not to increase fees by more than inflation.

Following agreement by the Executive, my officials and I will work with our counterparts in the Department of Education to develop a consultation document on the education maintenance allowance, for approval by the Executive in the autumn. I wish to stress that, unlike England, we are not looking to abolish the education maintenance allowance (EMA). Rather, the review is targeted at unlocking the inefficiencies within the current system and ensuring that young people who require assistance continue to receive it. The review should also be placed in the context of the overall access agenda for higher education and the overall protection of the education budget in this settlement.

I recognise that the settlement reached with the Executive and the overall funding package create many challenges for all the Departments involved, including my own, and for the higher education sector, which is already facing substantial reductions and other cost pressures. However, I believe that the decision by the Executive can be justified on the basis

that we are working collectively to invest in the economy and to address the critical challenge of upskilling the workforce. It is important to recognise that maintaining tuition fees at current levels, subject only to inflationary increases, demonstrates the importance that we place on access to higher education.

Of course, like others, I would have liked to have been able to do even more on access, but there are inevitable trade-offs between available funding and limited resources. It must be remembered that we work within the context of a block grant. That having been said, maintaining the level of tuition fees here and ensuring a sustainable higher education sector will clearly help to ensure that we continue our proud record of having the best higher education participation rates in the United Kingdom for those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, while ensuring that our universities and colleges can remain internationally competitive.

It is important, too, that I highlight the risks up front. Having different fee and support arrangements in each jurisdiction of the UK will create an enhanced risk of distortions in student flows. Around 30% of our undergraduates currently study in other parts of the UK, while a smaller percentage study in the Republic of Ireland. It is too early to predict how the tuition fees and student support arrangements of each Administration may impact on or influence behaviour with a resultant increase or decrease in the number of our students going to Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland or in the number of students coming here from Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland.

I know that many of our young people want to study in Great Britain for a variety of reasons. The decision by the Executive means that I can confirm that we will continue to provide tuition fee loans for Northern Ireland-domiciled students who attend university in any part of the United Kingdom. Those loans will be available to cover the cost of a loan up to a maximum fee of £9,000. I am sure that that will allay the concerns of many young people hoping to enter higher education in September 2012. However, that decision does have a significant cost implication for my Department and is an issue that we will need to monitor carefully. If there are increased cost pressures from changes in student flows, the Department may have to review this decision for new students entering higher education in future years.

Some Members have referred in the past to a brain drain, whereby our young people leave to study elsewhere and do not return to Northern Ireland. Although I am pleased to announce that we will provide tuition fee loans for young people who opt to study in Great Britain, I would be even happier if they were also able to return to work here and to apply their skills in the future.

That brings me to the issue of places for students here in Northern Ireland. We anticipate that increased fees in the rest of the United Kingdom will result in greater demand from Northern Ireland students to have the opportunity to study at home. We need to be responsive to that demand. Although the decisions on meeting the overall budget shortfall mean that I have very limited funding available to allow me to increase the number of student places in Northern Ireland, part of the package agreed with the Executive will allow for a modest increase in supply across higher education providers. We will work with higher education providers on this issue. Any additional places we are able to introduce during the CSR period will help to meet the expected increased demand from local students. In recognition of the importance of being responsive to the needs of industry and business in Northern Ireland, those places will be targeted at science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects only.

Anything we are able to do to increase student numbers will contribute towards protecting our participation rates, particularly among those from low-income backgrounds, as the extra competition for places locally may lead to those with lower or marginal grades being squeezed out. Those students are disproportionately from disadvantaged backgrounds.

I turn now to students from Great Britain who wish to study in Northern Ireland. I believe that it is important that we have a diverse student population in Northern Ireland and that our local universities should be open to students from all jurisdictions. However, I want students coming here to do so for the right reasons: because of the quality of our institutions, the quality of the university life and the future opportunities that are open to them. I do not want the determining factor to be cost. For those reasons, I can confirm that my Department will shortly be bringing subordinate legislation to the Committee for Employment and Learning that will allow our universities and colleges to

charge higher fees to students from other UK administrations. We want to avoid a parochial situation in which our universities service only a local market. Equally, we should not be seen as a cheap option.

Consequently, tuition fees for students from other parts of the United Kingdom will be higher than those for our own students, but they will be no higher than what our students would have to pay if they were studying in England or Wales.

Turning to support for living costs, the key point is that the options set out in the consultation paper were linked to the level of fees that might be charged. As I am not increasing tuition fees above inflation, I can confirm that our current grant levels will be maintained. That means that they will be £225 higher than the levels recently announced for England. Higher education providers will also continue to be required to provide bursaries to eligible students from low-income backgrounds.

The options set out in the consultation paper for the repayment regime were also linked to the level of fees that might be charged. As fees will not be increased above inflation, the current regime will also remain. That means that repayment will not begin until after borrowers leave higher education and are earning above a specified threshold. The earnings threshold is currently £15,000, but it will be uplifted by inflation each year throughout the comprehensive spending review period.

The quality of Northern Ireland universities is also important. At present, our two universities are increasingly recognised for the quality of their teaching across the UK and further afield and are respected as a source of leading-edge, world-class research. They have trained most of the professionals who work in Northern Ireland in science and engineering, business and legal services, health, education and many other sectors. They attract more than 50,000 students a year. Participation rates, particularly for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, are the highest in the UK. However, they are not only seats of learning. The higher education sector also makes a significant contribution to the local economy by acting as a hub for research and innovation; actively engaging in knowledge-transfer activities; promoting entrepreneurship; and providing industry, the professions and the public sector with experts and leaders. Clearly, we need to ensure that that excellence and

quality can continue. There is no point in holding fee levels down if it means that we are disinvesting from local universities and reducing the quality of their services.

Higher education is an important element of the skills agenda, but it is only one element. My Department's skills strategy, Transforming Futures, and its associated implementation plan, which I propose to publish shortly, will set out ambitious targets in relation to upskilling our workforce to meet the economic challenges ahead. Equally, I am committed to tackling issues around the levels of basic skills in our society, which will help to address our productivity gap.

The public consultation on tuition fees and higher education funding attracted responses from universities, university colleges, further education colleges, schools, student representative bodies, sector skills councils, trade unions, public sector organisations, individuals, business representative bodies and local development agencies. The range of organisations and individuals who responded to the consultation demonstrates clearly the impact of higher education on the economy, the community and society in Northern Ireland. I am grateful to all who responded, and I am grateful to the Committee for Employment and Learning for its continued interest and constructive feedback.

I have been giving detailed and careful consideration to all the responses received, and much of that is reflected in today's announcement. A number of other issues raised through the consultation will also be given further consideration in the context of the higher education strategy, which will be published in the autumn.

Details of all today's announcements will be available on Student Finance NI, NI Direct and the departmental websites. That will include question-and-answer materials to help students, families and others who are interested in arrangements for entry to higher education in 2012. I strongly encourage all to take a look at the sources of information.

In closing, my statement today on future fees and funding is genuinely good news for Northern Ireland. We have agreed a "Made in Northern Ireland" solution, which addresses the concerns of our young people in relation to their higher education prospects, sustains our universities'

standing and reputation in an increasingly competitive global market, and will deliver huge benefits to our economy and to society in general.

Mr B McCrea (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): Mr Deputy Speaker, I consulted the Speaker earlier this morning and he thought that it would be appropriate for me to say a few words on behalf of the Committee and then to say something on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party.

1.15 pm

There are some questions to be asked about the information provided by the Minister, and I am quite sure that the Committee will want to understand more about the risks that the Minister outlined in his statement. He said:

"In the 2014-15 financial year, my Department and the higher education sector will find £22 million to meet that pressure. That will be done without any further reductions to the critical front line services".

Frankly, I am interested to see how that will be done, because in previous consultations with the Minister and his permanent secretary, I was led to believe that £7 million would be hard to find, let alone £22 million. The Minister also highlighted the fact that there is a risk of differential student flows in different jurisdictions. I do not believe that we have really got to the bottom of that, so we will need to keep an eye on it.

I reinforce the fact that the Committee will no doubt be concerned about the Minister saying:

"that decision does have a significant cost implication for my Department and is an issue that we will need to monitor carefully."

The Committee will, in the fullness of time, consider those matters and engage with the Minister and his Department.

Speaking on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I would like the Minister to explain why, given the huge contribution by the taxpayers of England and Wales to the people of Northern Ireland, he thinks that it is fair for students from England and Wales to be charged almost three times as much as students from Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland or elsewhere in the European Union for exactly the same course.

Will the Minister also explain why he is seeking to increase the number of students at our

universities, when 10% of students fail to complete their first year and many of those who do graduate cannot find jobs? Does he concede that encouraging young people into an educational pathway that may not suit them and that does not provide them with the support they need or the skills demanded by industry is a bigger concern than any amount of debt that they may incur?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. A large number of Members have put down questions, and we have just one hour. I think that you have enough questions to occupy you, Minister.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will take your point of order after we have dealt with the statement.

Dr Farry: I thank the Committee Chair not just for his questions this afternoon but for the role that he and, indeed, all the Committee members have played in dealing with the issue over the past number of months. It was important that a clear political signal was sent out that there is consensus in Northern Ireland on maintaining the current level of tuition fees and that a collective approach was needed in the Executive to address the shortfall. Indeed, the Committee Chair's comments have been particularly helpful in that regard.

I do not want to address each and every one of the Chair's points, but I will address some of them. First, the Chair talked about risks. Let me be clear: there are many risks with the policy announced today. Where there are differential fee levels in different parts of the UK, there will be distortions in student flows, and we will have to manage that. Those risks are an inevitable consequence of the decision to keep fees at their current level. Although we want to keep fees down, we recognise the flip side of the coin. No one is going into this process with their eyes closed to what those risks may be.

I want to make one thing perfectly clear: there is no risk whatsoever with the budgetary figures from my Department and the Executive that have been presented here today. I made it clear all along that it would have been impossible for me to make any announcement about the level of tuition fees in Northern Ireland without, at the same time, securing and having certainty about the budgetary figures. I am sure that the Finance Minister would give exactly the same

message that the Executive would not sign off on any revised financial figures relating to the issue unless they were prepared to stand over them. Therefore, the risks that we talk about relate to student loans and not to the numbers in the budget that I have announced today. I have always been clear that I was not prepared to move until there was surety on that issue.

Of course there will be pain for my Department. We have factored in the additional costs as added efficiencies beyond the £145 million that was asked of my Department as part of Budget 2010. Those costs have been factored in and will be internalised in, for example, how we manage the estate and staff issues, such as vacancies, travel and subsistence. I am prepared to make it clear that the arrangement that I have announced today does not come at the expense of further education, the wider skills agenda, apprenticeships or the employment service. For sure, there are pressures right across my budget, and I will continue to highlight them. However, I am not prepared to make a difficult situation worse owing to the higher education settlement. It was always regarded as an issue that had to be addressed discretely.

On the issue of the fairness of charging higher fees to students from the rest of UK, I accept that what we propose to do may seem strange and, to some people, unfair. It is less about raising resources, although that is important in order to make the budget figures work. I stress that, in a situation in which fees are potentially £9,000 in many institutions in England, Scotland and Wales and just over £3,000 in Northern Ireland, we can expect a flood of applications from other parts of the UK. If we are prepared to take measures to protect the market for local students — every one of us has received masses of correspondence from disappointed students and their parents, who are frustrated that they are unable to secure places in local universities — and although I do not like the fact that we must go down that route, when we take a decision on differential fees, that is the inevitable decision that we must take as an Assembly if we are to act responsibly for our citizens.

The issues around the increase in places while people are dropping out are separate. We have to address retention in our universities. However, let us be clear that, equally, there is a requirement to upskill Northern Ireland's

population. As the economy grows in years to come, we are required to produce a higher number of skilled graduates. A large element of Northern Ireland's productivity gap, not only with the UK but with the rest of Europe, is linked to its skills deficits. My Department will address that across a broad front, but a large element of that has to concern what happens in higher education institutions.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call Mr Alastair Ross, I remind Members of the Speaker's ruling earlier today that Members should confine themselves to one question.

Mr Ross: I thank the Minister for his statement. He is correct to say that prospective students will welcome his decision and that those who aspire to go to university will welcome the fact that they will not have to pay higher fees. However, he referred to the financial burden that that will place on his Department and the significant savings that have to be made. Can he assure the House that that will not be achieved at the detriment of those young people who do not go to university but who still need to be upskilled and get training in order to find a job in the current climate?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Ross for his comments. I am happy to give that assurance. I have a commitment to addressing skills right across Northern Ireland's population. My Department is the Department for Employment and Learning, not the "Department of Higher Education". A discrete solution for higher education is needed. I am clear, as I have always been, both internally and in discussions with other Ministers, that we must ensure that other aspects of the Department's work are protected. Indeed, I will seek to invest further in those areas in the months to come.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement. I ask the Minister to detail his Department's strategy for widening participation, including perhaps delivering a higher percentage of foundation degree courses through regional colleges. I say that as a member of my party, which states in its manifesto that it absolutely opposes tuition fees per se and, latterly, any increase in tuition fees. I welcome the Minister's decision. I ask the Minister for further detail on the widening participation agenda to ensure that people from low- and middle-income families and from rural communities can access higher education.

Dr Farry: I thank Mr McElduff for his question. I am always pleased to try to help Sinn Féin to deliver its manifesto.

The important thing to stress about widening participation is that there has been a separate consultation on that as well as a consultation on a higher education strategy. I intend to bring those two consultations together and to make a more detailed announcement on that during the autumn, once this issue has been addressed.

On the particular issue of further education and foundation degrees, it is important to qualify my remarks by saying that we need to ensure that we maintain a distinction between further education and higher education, because they provide distinct roles. However, higher education in further education is something that is of importance to our economy. When you hear me refer to additional places for higher education providers, as opposed to higher education institutions, you may get an indication that I am very open to exploring what we can do through further education.

Mr P Ramsey: Like other colleagues, I thank the Minister for coming forward with most welcome news for many families and young people across Northern Ireland. However, it would appear that DEL has taken a big hit and has been short-changed. You can talk about protecting existing services and employment opportunities, but it would appear from your statement that there is an £18 million deficit, which you indicate will be met entirely from the EMA budget. That will cause us major concern, given the not in education, employment or training (NEETs) inquiry that the Committee for Employment and Learning has carried out and the contribution that DEL and other Departments were meant to make.

Given what the Minister is telling the House in respect of additional student numbers across Northern Ireland, where does that leave his commitment to create 1,000 additional student places at the University of Ulster's Magee campus?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Ramsey for his general support for the policy and his questions.

First, let me stress that this is, overall, a good deal for Northern Ireland. This is a good deal for the Executive: it is a demonstration of the Executive working and delivering for Northern Ireland. This is also a good deal for my Department, and I would not be here and would

not have accepted the package in the Executive if I did not feel that this was the best balanced deal for us all.

I recognise that my Department has to provide a leadership role in addressing this issue, which is why we have taken on a disproportionate share of the overall burden. However, that burden has been shared out collectively. An element of the share that my Department has to bear will be addressed through increased efficiencies that will not impact upon front line delivery in the sectors that I mentioned. It also includes an element that will be borne by the higher education institutions.

There is also money that I had originally hoped to be able to use for a more expansive increase in places at this stage. That money, however, has been used to assist with the overall package. The Executive felt that it was more prudent to adopt a wait-and-see approach to see the real evidence on additional student flows before setting aside additional resources, although we can, of course, go back for those resources in due course, and that has been made clear by the Executive. However, we have some money that has been set aside for an immediate increase in places to be discussed and implemented over the current CSR period.

I want to be very clear in case any misunderstandings occur around this. The level of resourcing that we have — about £3 million in the 2014-15 budget — will only allow us to provide several hundred additional places. We cannot be precise until we have proper discussions with all the institutions to work out exactly how those will be implemented. However, based on these figures, it is not realistic to expect an expansion of the Magee campus of the University of Ulster on the scale that Mr Ramsey has set out.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that another 14 Members have tabled questions. I ask Members to be brief, and I also ask the Minister to be as concise as he can.

1.30 pm

Mr Lyttle: I join the House in welcoming the good news that the Minister brought to the Assembly today. It will ensure that our universities retain their competitiveness and accessibility. My Committee colleagues pointed out that, in its NEETs inquiry, the Committee identified that the education maintenance

allowance played an important role in other forms of further education. Will the Minister further clarify the timescale for the review of EMA and how the Committee will play a role in that consultation process?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Lyttle for his support for the statement and, indeed, for his question. I omitted to address the EMA points that the previous questioner made.

Let me be clear: I support the education maintenance allowance in Northern Ireland. I am sure that I speak for the Minister of Education when I say that we both feel that it plays and will play an important role in ensuring that people from disadvantaged backgrounds are encouraged to remain in education. However, within EMA, there is considerable inefficiency. There is money that is not being used effectively, and it is not making a difference in keeping people in education. It is important — indeed, it is the only responsible act for the Executive — to try to release those funds and to put them to more productive uses. Certainly, I believe that maintaining the agenda of having access to higher education is one such use.

At present, EMA in Northern Ireland costs about £28 million. That is split between the two Departments. Indeed, there is some uplift pressure due to increased demand in that regard. We can expect, however, to realise some savings from a review. Certainly, the Committee will be kept fully informed of the consultation once the Executive agree it, and, indeed, it will be an integral part of the decisions that we take on the matter in due course.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for his statement. He was at pains to try to be as unambiguous as he could, and I welcome that. He talked about a modest increase in supply across higher education providers. For the avoidance of any doubt, will he spell out approximately how many additional places there will be in the CSR period in the University of Ulster at its Belfast, Coleraine and Magee campuses?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Campbell for his question. These are important issues. It was my intention and hope that I would have had more resources for a wider expansion of student places at this stage, but the Executive decided to adopt a more prudent and measured approach. Through to 2014-15, we have £3 million allocated for an expansion of places. At this stage, I cannot be

prescriptive about precisely how many that will fund, because we have to have discussions with the higher education providers to work out exactly what sort of courses they want to provide through those additional resources. Obviously, some courses cost more money than others.

We are talking about the overall number of places across Northern Ireland that that level of funding would provide being in the low hundreds. That will be split between the different providers. It is not for me as Minister to micromanage how those places are distributed internally in the universities; it is for Queen's and the University of Ulster to allocate their shares between their various campuses. I certainly would not direct that at all, although the University of Ulster has made comments about what it views as its priorities. In the light of the more, shall we say, modest scale that we are able to offer at this stage, that is a decision that it may wish to reflect on further.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Ms Michelle Gildernew.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. This point of order relates to the order of business, here and now.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, I have to be consistent. I did not take Mr McCrea's point of order until after —

Mr Allister: I want to refer you to a ruling that says that those who have not been present in the House throughout the entirety of the statement should not be called until those who have been have been called. I think that you are about to call someone who has not been present throughout the entirety of the statement. I refer you to the ruling of 24 September 2007.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Yes, I give consideration to the ruling. Ms Gildernew was absent for only a very short period of a very long statement, and, on balance, I decided that it was not appropriate.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement and the fact that resources will not be extracted from the Department of Education, which is already under enormous financial pressure. As the Minister said in his statement, given that lower and middle income families are already being squeezed out, it

is important that we ensure that those from disadvantaged backgrounds have access to quality primary and post-primary education in preparation for third-level education.

Minister, in your statement, you alluded to the fact that 30% of students leave here to pursue further and higher education elsewhere. How many of those students leave out of choice, and how many leave out of necessity?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her question. We do not have a precise breakdown of that 30%, but it is a combination of the reasons that the Member set out. At this stage, I am minded that we should continue to fund students who find themselves in that situation. For me to do otherwise would create a two-tier system in which those who can afford to study and pay higher fees elsewhere in the UK are able to leave to Northern Ireland, while those from more disadvantaged backgrounds cannot. It is also worth stressing that some courses, such as veterinary science, are offered only outside of Northern Ireland, and we have a specific obligation in that respect. There is also the issue of those who do not get the necessary grades for the institutions in Northern Ireland, which, as competition for places heats up, may become more acute. It is important that we offer our local residents the option of accessing higher education.

The only plea that I would make, and I am sure that the entire House would concur, is that if students want to go and study elsewhere, do so, but please come back and invest your future in growing the economy of Northern Ireland.

Mr D McIlveen: I also welcome the statement. This is a very brave move by the Minister and one that will come as very good news to many of our students. The interest in this subject undoubtedly proves how the work of the Committee for Employment and Learning, and the Department, really matters, despite some of the comments that were made by a certain Member before the summer recess.

However, although we fully welcome the decision, it came on the back of crisis management and the possibility of an entire department having to close in one of our universities as the result of the gap in funding. What provisions are the universities making for the next four years to ensure that in four years' time we are not back at square one and having to have this conversation all over again?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr McIlveen for his comments. The settlement illustrates how the institutions in Northern Ireland can work. Decisions were taken in time. I will say no more than that, but the various stakeholders involved were extremely keen for us to make clear what was going to happen in the future.

I want to say two things on what Mr McIlveen asked. First, our universities, like all other aspects of the public sector, are addressing cuts that were passed on through my Department. Therefore, the universities will have to undergo pain, and those who are closely associated with both of the institutions will be very much aware of that. Secondly, what is good about the financial package that was agreed by the Executive is that it is hard-wired into my Department's baselines. It is not a monitoring round solution and it has a degree of permanence. However, it is worth stressing that our understandings cover only the current CSR period to 2015, and there is a potential for the debate to be reopened on both the level of fees and funding. Once the decision has been taken and it beds down, I would like to think that what we are doing today will roll forward into the future, and not least because it has been baselined. However, obviously, we cannot bind future Executives on what budgetary decisions they should take.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, in your statement you said that we have a requirement to upskill our population, but has your Department carried out an analysis of courses that are not available in Northern Ireland? In furtherance to a previous answer, will you detail your Department's plans to deal with the disproportionate effect of university tuition fees on those would-be undergraduates for whom there is no third-level education provision in Northern Ireland? Included in that are students who wish to study veterinary science, but there are others, and they can expect to be burdened with debts in the region of £80,000 or more on graduation.

Dr Farry: The commitment to upskilling permeates everything that my Department does, from essential skills through to higher education. Indeed, what we do on welfare issues and getting people off the unemployment register is also about skills, including employability skills.

It is worth stressing, as Mrs Overend has done, that there are courses that are not offered in Northern Ireland. We have highlighted veterinary science as the clearest example. For that reason and because we may well have increased competition for places in Northern Ireland, it is important that my Department continues to fund students from Northern Ireland who go to Great Britain. However, I want to make it very clear that we are doing so based on my Department's current projections. In the event that the cost exceeds what we are currently budgeting for and any additional resources that we can find internally to manage those pressures, we may have to review that policy down the line. As we welcome the decisions that we are taking on fees, it is important to also be aware that, once different parts of the UK have different funding regimes, there will be risks that we will have to manage. If those risks go wrong, we will have to take mitigating measures in Northern Ireland.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Minister for his statement. Notwithstanding the financial challenges faced by the Executive, and considering the centrality of further and higher education to growing the economy and building the skills base throughout Northern Ireland, will the Minister ensure that all actions are taken to increase the maximum student number (MaSN) cap and thus ensure full access for students, particularly those from low income and working class families throughout Northern Ireland? I think, in particular, of the MaSN cap for STEM subjects for the South Eastern Regional College, which the Minister opened recently.

Dr Farry: I thank Ms Ritchie for her comments and echo them. What happens in higher education is central to our economy in two key respects: increasing the number of skilled graduates and the offering of research and development. A disproportionate amount of our research and development in Northern Ireland is focused through our universities compared with other jurisdictions, so we are very dependent on that sector.

In relation to MaSN, I am conscious of the need, and the future need, to increase the number of places offered in Northern Ireland. An inescapable pressure emerging from the decisions that we are taking on fees throughout the UK will have an impact on student flows. The Executive have decided that we will have a modest increase in MaSN at this stage, starting next year through to 2014-15. Once

we see the flows in practice next year, we have the potential to go back to seek additional resources based on the actual evidence of the student flows rather than on what is essentially still speculation.

Mr Storey: I welcome the Minister's statement. He is just after saying that what happens in further education is central to our economy, and he referred to risk in his statement. I have raised an issue with the Minister over the last few days regarding the Ballymoney campus of the Northern Regional College. Can he dispel any rumours that there may be an attempt to look at particular campuses for closure over a short period, in some way as a result of the budgetary pressures that his Department will now face after today's statement?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Storey for his question. There are budgetary issues facing the further education (FE) sector, as there are in any other sector in my Department that was part of Budget 2010. The current level of efficiencies asked of FE is proportionally less than in other sectors in my Department. Therefore, generally speaking, FE has had a good settlement as part of Budget 2010 compared with other areas.

The institutions have to manage their estates, but there are processes in place to do so. On the discrete issue of this settlement, I want to make it clear that not a penny is coming from the FE sector to fund higher education. The FE sector will be judged entirely on its own merits, and I regard its sheer breadth of engagement with the skills agenda to be critical for the future of our economy.

1.45 pm

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for his statement. He said that there will be higher fees for students from other parts of the United Kingdom. What level of fees will students coming from the Republic of Ireland have to pay?

Dr Farry: As Mr Elliott probably knows, students from the Republic of Ireland are treated as European Union students and have the same status as those coming from any other part of the European Union. Under EC laws, we cannot do anything but charge the same level of fees as we will for Northern Ireland students.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement and think that it is good news for higher education. However, I am sure that the

Minister will have some concerns about the number of young people who are in the NEETS bracket. Young people in my constituency have fallen into that bracket through no fault of their own because there are not sufficient places in either higher or further education. What does the Minister intend to do to help those students?

Will he also clarify a point about the review of the education maintenance allowance? I understand that that is a Department of Education policy and that the £22 million that the Department for Learning and Employment has to fund towards the £40 million deficit is not part of that pot. Therefore, in theory, DEL will be putting more than £22 million towards the current shortfall. It will be up to the Education Minister to announce reductions in EMA to a number of students.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question, please.

Mrs D Kelly: I have already asked it.

Dr Farry: NEETS is another issue that my Department is working on: we are an extremely busy Department as you can all see. A report was commissioned through the Committee, which I think Mrs Kelly was chairing at that stage. A paper has gone to the Executive for wider consultation. We are working on a NEETS strategy, which we will bring to the Executive and the Committee in the near future and which will, hopefully, address some of those issues.

EMA cuts across the Department of Education and my Department. In crude terms, around 60% of the spend is held in education and around 40% is held in DEL. When we have a review, depending on what decisions we take, there will be a differential impact in how much each Department will be able to contribute to the centre. Those moneys are part of the Executive's half of the overall equation.

Mr McCallister: Is it not strange that the Minister has set up this review and consultation, yet he has already factored in the savings that he needs to make? What savings does he need to make from EMA?

Dr Farry: It is not unusual for budget decisions to be taken around anticipated savings from reforms. Bearing in mind the fact that the figures we are announcing today are based on sound budgetary assumptions and very prudent and conservative estimates, it is fair to say that

the overall amount that we spend on EMA in Northern Ireland is around £28 million. There is some increased demand on the system given the current economic situation. Equally, there is considerable inefficiency. The current Executive figures are based on realising a sum in the region of £4 million and £5 million by 2014-15. So, even though we may be able to generate greater savings through the reform of EMA, the actual figures that this settlement is based on are a conservative capture of inefficiency in EMA at present.

Mr Allister: In respect of the Minister's belated statement on tuition fees, I note his determination to assure us all that the huge cuts that his Department now has to bear will not impact on the skill provision and creation of employment opportunities for which his Department has responsibility at present. I am expressing some scepticism about that, given the fact that, for four years, meeting the tuition fee threshold is the Department's top priority and the fact that there are imponderables such as the possibility — hopefully not — of the mooted challenge in Scotland in respect of the viability of the fees structure kicking in.

Will the Minister really assure us, and does he agree that, if he cannot, it would be a travesty, that young people who do not aspire to go university and who do not have that opportunity should not end up seeing detriment to facilitate those who, thankfully, are going to university? That travesty could emerge unless the most stringent efforts are made. Of course, the Minister could have been helped —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question, please.

Mr Allister: — if other Departments had borne their share of the burden, particularly the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) with its many over-funded and underspent programmes.

Dr Farry: I do not regard my statement as being belated. I am sure that, if I were here today announcing unilateral fee rises, Mr Allister would be the first person to accuse me of being irresponsible for doing so without budgetary backup. For me, the issues of fees and budgets are clearly inextricably linked. I am here today and am confident of the figures for my Department and for the Executive overall. I am also very clear that there will not be cuts elsewhere in my Department. That was an issue that was going to be addressed for higher

education or, alternatively, for the Executive overall, and we have found a combination of the two to address that. So we can be confident of the figures that we have here today.

I assume that Mr Allister shares in the consensus that we do not want to increase fees in Northern Ireland. Once we take that decision, there are implications on budgets in Northern Ireland because we have a fixed block grant, and we have to live with the consequences on our local priorities of the decisions that we take as a devolved Executive and Assembly. That is what devolution is all about.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for his announcement today, and I certainly welcome it. If I remember correctly, I think that he told me in hustings on the campaign trail that anyone proposing not to increase fees was being unrealistic, so I am glad that the Minister has joined me in the realm of the unrealistic.

The Minister mentioned the brain drain and the attempts that have been made to keep students in Northern Ireland or to attract them back after their university studies. What is his policy on students coming from other regions of the UK as well as Europe? Do we want an inflow, given the skills that that would bring and the benefits to our economy, or are we trying to discourage that? Indeed, is the future policy to increase the MaSN cap to try to bring as many high-skilled workers as possible into Northern Ireland?

Dr Farry: If people come to Northern Ireland to study, to work or to do both, it is a strong indication of the health of our society and the future prospects of our economy, which is a good thing. In the current profile of our two local universities, there are not many students who come from Great Britain or, indeed, international students who come from further afield. I speak for both institutions in reflecting the fact that they want to increase those numbers to have a diverse student body in Northern Ireland.

The fees that our local institutions will potentially charge for students coming from other parts of the UK will be no higher than the fees that they face elsewhere in the UK. So in some senses there is a level playing field about the choices that they will make. The numbers of students whom we have attracted from elsewhere in the UK and internationally have been artificially depressed because of the Troubles and other divisions in this society.

I will be very keen to see our student body becoming much more diverse in the future. When we talk about student places in the future, international and GB students will be separate from those considerations because, hopefully, those students will be self-financing, and the funds will not have to come out of our block grant.

Mr McCartney: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas an tráthnóna seo. I welcome the Minister's announcement this afternoon. I want to ask him about the particular point in his statement in which he addressed the issue of an increase in places. He said that he was going to take a wait-and-see approach. When he does that, will he ensure that any increase in places is demand led? The Magee campus of the University of Ulster has made its case, and it has been accepted. When we try to increase places, we should do it on a demand-led basis, and we should look for a maximum outcome. The need for more student places in the Magee campus and the wider social and economic impact that an increase will have are widely accepted by Ilex and in the regeneration plan.

Dr Farry: I am very conscious of the interest in the north-west in an expansion in university places. I will be visiting Ilex and the Magee campus on Wednesday. The Member talked about my wait-and-see approach. However, that is an Executive approach, and wait and see is probably not the right way of putting it. We are looking for an evidence-based approach to policymaking, which is not an entirely irresponsible thing to do.

That said, we have secured the resources to allow us to fund a modest increase in student places in Northern Ireland, starting from next year, on a phased basis through to 2014 and 2015. For the sake of clarity and to prevent unrealistic expectations building up, that increase will only provide for several hundred places across all the different providers in Northern Ireland, including the University of Ulster. To be fair, the Magee campus's plans will not be addressed on the basis of this announcement. However, there is scope to go back to the Executive in due course, over the coming years, based on the evidence of the demand to which Mr McCartney referred, to make a strong case for additional resources. This is not necessarily about resources for the north-west. That will be a bonus if that is the way that it works out; the University of Ulster will have to make those decisions. It will be about the

Executive responding in kind to the evidence of increased demand for places from local students.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister for Employment and Learning.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was a little disappointed that you were not able to take my point of order during the ministerial statement. I presume that that was because it is not really in order to take a point of order during such proceedings. Perhaps we will get some clarity on that. I would like you to convey to the Speaker my disappointment that I was not able to make my final point in my questions to the Minister. I had taken the precaution of speaking to the Speaker about how to go about it, and I thought that I had carried matters through under his direction.

It seems to me that there is some confusion about the latitude that a Committee Chairperson has in making his initial points to a Minister. Given the interest in this particular issue, we might have had a little more latitude in the matter. That is not an attack on you, Mr Deputy Speaker, but we might, perhaps, have organised things a little bit better. What will happen now is that the debate will take place outside the Chamber rather than within it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will respond to the Member by saying that one is, sometimes, not perfect. However, I am sure that Mr McCrea will agree that he had moved on to speak as an Ulster Unionist. Today, the Speaker made it perfectly clear that each Member would ask one question. I hope that the Member also appreciates that there were 20 people down to ask questions, all of whom were accommodated. That was a big achievement for the Minister and for all Members who took the Speaker's earlier advice and kept their questions concise.

Nevertheless, I understand the Member's feelings. He had an important point to make, but, in future, perhaps he will make it earlier.

2.00 pm

Committee Business

Committee Membership

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

Resolved:

That Mr Paul Maskey replace Ms Caitríona Ruane as a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel; that Mr Oliver McMullan replace Mr Gerry Kelly as a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure; and that Mr Pat Doherty replace Mr Paul Maskey as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. — [Ms J McCann.]

Private Members' Business

Green Economy

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

Ms Lo: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to make the development of the green economy a priority within the next Programme for Government and to affirm that an overarching strategy for the development of the green economy should be implemented; and further calls on the Executive to bring together existing policies and initiatives, to identify gaps and to address them.

I am delighted that the first motion for debate after the summer recess is on the green economy, which the Alliance Party believes can create new jobs and tackle climate change by developing energy efficiency and renewables. We urge the Executive to prioritise the green economy in the Programme for Government (PFG) and to agree an overall development strategy.

We need a joined-up approach to address the triple crunch of recession, energy prices and climate change. Businesses are still struggling, and, in February this year, Northern Ireland saw the largest increase in unemployment in the 12 UK regions, with over 59,000 people finding themselves unemployed. Compared with February last year, this year's figures were up 6.3%, while other UK regions saw a decrease of 9.1%. People who have lost their job or closed down their business ask politicians what they have done to get us out of the economic downturn.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Northern Ireland already has the highest levels of fuel poverty in the UK. Nevertheless, over the past few months, households have been hit further by huge price increases in domestic gas, electricity, coal and home heating oil. This winter, thousands of households in Northern Ireland will struggle to heat their home adequately. Energy costs are also the single biggest competitive disadvantage for local businesses. The Alliance Party sees the

potential of new forms of economic growth and employment from the green revolution, and, given our rich natural resources in wind and tides, it believes that Northern Ireland has an opportunity to become a world leader in renewable energy.

The environment sector is one of the fastest growing sectors in the world economy. Other countries are already well aware of that and have embraced green energy. The Danish wind industry employed 28,400 people in 2008 and contributed €5.7 billion to the economy. Germany employed 160,000 people in the renewable energy sector in 2004.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does she agree that it was rather disappointing that, on a recent trip down Strangford Lough on other business, we saw the SeaGen investment, which was supposed to be a major investment for green energy, sitting doing nothing? We were advised at the time that it would produce good, cheap, clean electricity and bring jobs to the local economy. It is disappointing to see that, for some reason or other, it was sitting doing nothing on the day on which we had our trip.

Ms Lo: I agree. I believe that it will be put back together again soon.

In 2004, Germany employed 160,000 people in the industry. That rose to 278,000 following a stimulus plan in 2008 to create a green economy in the country. There is a growing demand for the manufacture of wind turbines, hybrid cars and solar panels, but we are missing out on that potential market. Some of our companies, such as Harland and Wolff, have made small inroads into the sector, but not enough is being done to help to grow the industry overall.

Countries no longer have a choice when it comes to developing renewable energy. European targets for 2020 mean that 15% of the UK's energy and 16% of the Republic of Ireland's energy must be renewable energy. Failing to meet those targets will mean huge fines from the EU. If countries are being forced to produce renewable energy, there is the opportunity for us to develop a sector in which we can build wind turbines or tidal technology for the local and overseas markets.

Research has indicated that targeted investment and growth of the renewable sector

could create up to 30,000 jobs. Employment opportunities include high-tech manufacturing jobs, maintenance jobs at wind power plants and biomass production jobs in the agriculture sector. Biomass production can often be a very good way for farmers to diversify and gain much-needed grants, particularly from land that does not contribute much to their farms. I am sure that everybody agrees that we have the agricultural expertise to accomplish that, but farmers need help from the Executive to realise that potential. The market can drive a certain degree of innovation and change, but there is a rationale for state intervention, such as providing incentives through the tax and regulatory systems.

Mr Newton: Does the Member agree with me and the director of the Renewable Energy Foundation, Mr John Constable, who argues that hopes that the low-carbon economy will deliver thousands of green-collar jobs are “staggeringly far-fetched”?

Ms Lo: I am not sure whether there is evidence to back that up.

Mr Newton: It is from a press statement that was issued by Mr John Constable, who is the director of the Renewable Energy Foundation.

Ms Lo: There are certainly competing bodies of evidence. That is perhaps for another debate on another day. Thank for your intervention, anyway.

Scotland has shown an exemplary way in which to go about creating jobs and investment in renewable energy. The Scottish Parliament passed a law that designated parts of the country and the surrounding waters as a renewable energy enterprise zone. That makes sense because, given Scotland's location, it has perhaps the largest potential in Europe for renewable energy production. Northern Ireland has perhaps the second best location in Europe, but we are not harnessing the wind and tidal resources that we possess. The Executive must invest more in research and development on renewable energy technology. The cross-departmental group on the green new deal needs to work with all relevant Departments, our two universities, other universities, businesses and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to achieve a strategic and overarching plan to develop the green economy. We have the potential to become world leaders —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Ms Lo: Yes, sure. I am getting a lot of interventions.

Mr F McCann: The home improvement grant used to be available to homeowners, but it has all but dried up. Over the next number of years, thousands of houses will fall into disrepair. Would it not be better to look at how we provide additional grants tied to eco-friendly building, which could put thousands of construction workers back to work?

Ms Lo: I absolutely agree. The retrofit scheme is very important. Insulation is a way to cut energy bills. There is plenty of scope for working with —

Mr McCarthy: You had better hurry up.

Ms Lo: Mr Speaker, am I getting an extra minute?

Mr Speaker: No.

Ms Lo: Oh dear. There is plenty of scope for working with the South on renewable energy or further development of the single energy network and the North/South interconnectors to create economies of scale. North/South co-operation —

Mr Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Ms Lo: — can be beneficial to all of us on a green island basis. A green economy will not only create jobs and investment but undoubtedly improve our environment —

Mr Speaker: Time is up.

Ms Lo: — and help to cut carbon emissions.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members to watch the clock.

Mr Spratt: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will not give way as many times.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. There has never been a better time to consider moving towards a green economy. All too often, we hear of pensioners having to make the choice between heating or eating due to the soaring costs of fuel and food. In the twenty-first century it is simply not acceptable that older people are faced with that unreasonable choice. At the heart of the green economy is resource and energy efficiency, and we must accept that many sources of energy are finite. As they become less available, they become more expensive and, unless we manage them more effectively, they will run out completely. Making

homes more energy-efficient tackles poverty, not only for the elderly but for other vulnerable members of society. It is good news that new houses being built for social housing must meet high standards in being low-carbon and energy-efficient. In fact, with strong insulation and ventilation systems, those houses should not require any heating at all. That is good news for tenants in the future.

I welcome the fact that all Departments and agencies are working together to develop the green economy. An interdepartmental working group, chaired by the Department for Social Development (DSD), has set up work on the green new deal. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), through Invest Northern Ireland, funds the Carbon Trust, which promotes energy efficiency. The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has issued guidelines to encourage colleges to develop curricula to enable students to develop the skills and knowledge that will contribute to sustainable development. Those are only a couple of examples of how the green economy is already being developed in Northern Ireland.

It is vital that resource efficiency is promoted at all levels of society. In particular, schools should educate young people to promote longer-term, sustainable production and consumption. If we can get the message through now, we will benefit in the future. We must be innovative if we are going to create opportunities for business and employment.

Our workforce must be prepared for the jobs that will be created as a result of the development of the green economy. The areas that will benefit most include the agriculture, building, energy, forestry and transport sectors. Tourism also contributes vast sums to the Northern Ireland economy through the natural heritage as well as built heritage. Yesterday was a European heritage day, and many of our castles, churches and listed buildings were open to the public free of charge. We are sometimes not aware of how much potential is there, and we must find innovative ways to exploit that potential to grow our economy.

2.15 pm

For a period, I worked in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), when it was the old Environment and Heritage Service, and I often felt that many of our most treasured tourist attractions, such as Scrabo Tower and the abbey

at Greyabbey could do with some investment to encourage tourism, because we now see tour ships and so on coming in. Therefore, as part of the green new deal, we need to look at that whole area and make sure that tourism is encouraged. We have hundreds of sites throughout Northern Ireland, and we need to take a holistic look at how tourism can be developed and at how we can form an overall strategy.

My party broadly supports the development of a green economy. However, in this difficult economic climate, it is important to ensure that public funds be used to provide the best value for money for the taxpayer. That should be our top priority. We on this side of the House support the motion.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin also supports the motion, and I thank the Members who tabled it for bringing it to the House. The green economy is a term used to describe a broad range of economic activities, including improving our environment and quality of air, water and food. I will deal with energy issues in my contribution, because they are most relevant to the motion.

The green economy, in my and Sinn Féin's opinion, is the future. We have the technology, but we sometimes have to ask ourselves whether we have the political will to bring it about. To support the transition from fossil fuel, we need to make the green economy a priority and invest in it. The green economy can do more than create business opportunities. It can get people back to work, particularly our young people who are leaving our island in their thousands to find work. It will help people who have lost their job in the manufacturing and construction industries, and it provides an opportunity to retrain a workforce for future needs. In my constituency, where there have been heavy losses in the construction sector, there are opportunities for offshore wind farms. I want resources to be dedicated to training a workforce to deliver that. We must take up the opportunity that will exist. We should not allow people from outside the island of Ireland to take those jobs because we do not have the skill base.

Investment in priority areas such as renewable energy, alternative fuel for vehicles, energy efficiency and high-performance buildings are essential to our communities. Energy efficiency projects are of huge benefit to local

communities from both an environmental and a jobs perspective. Energy efficiency concepts in buildings, constructions and retrofits —

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that a green economy cannot be market-led? Green economies require two things: a decrease in the overall quantity of goods being produced and an increase in democratic decisions about the production of goods. Therefore, market economics cannot be applied to a green economy.

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

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat. I agree. The most important point to get across is that we need the political will to drive a green economy.

The main aspect of a green economy is that it should take people out of fuel poverty. The Member who spoke previously also talked about that. If we need a wake-up call, we just have to look at prices at the petrol pumps, at the price of fossil fuels and at the huge increases that were announced recently in electricity and gas charges. I think that this is the wake-up call. Fossil fuels will not get cheaper, and they will not be made available to our most vulnerable at a cheaper rate. We have to look at new technologies, and we need to reduce our oil consumption by promoting clean, renewable fuel alternatives.

There needs to a cross-departmental approach to developing effective strategies, which include installing renewable power systems in our public sector buildings, such as the Assembly itself and its estate. We need to ensure that we put renewable power systems into all government buildings, and we need to work towards that in a phased approach. We need to look at district heating schemes and provide planning and resources to deliver them for our communities, particularly where there is a great onus on us to do so. Whenever we build a leisure complex, we should put a district heating scheme with it to provide energy to the houses that are in close proximity.

I will touch on employers who benefit from subsidies to provide renewables, such as offshore wind farms. There has to be an onus on providing a percentage of apprenticeships for local people, and that will, in turn, increase the opportunity to have well-paid jobs in our communities. Last week, I had discussions

with a further education college that said that it needed resources to provide training for renewables. I am back to offshore wind energy: if we are to have that qualified workforce, we need to put resources in place. The college told me that a Dutch firm was looking for the college to provide training. When that came to the Department, it said that it would not fund companies from outside the North of Ireland. I find it rather strange that we could be developing offshore wind opportunities and not have a skilled workforce to take up those jobs. I do not think that that is acceptable to the House or to the greater community.

Planning is a big issue, and I think that my colleague will discuss it in greater detail. However, when it comes to anaerobic digestion proposals or to single wind turbines, so is Nimbyism. Those proposals were meant to be fast-tracked, yet they are stalling in the system.

Mr Newton: Energy from waste —

Mr W Clarke: That is your opinion.

Mr Newton: Do you agree with that?

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr W Clarke: Thank you for your leniency, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion.

Mr Kinahan: I too am extremely pleased to speak on and support the motion, as I think it is extremely important that we have a seismic shift, if I may use that term, towards a green economy. I am pleased to hear that all the other parties support the motion. I had written in my notes that I would make a little quip about climate change and about whether we believed that it was our fault. It is good to have our colleagues on the Benches to my left support the green economy.

At the beginning of the weekend, we heard President Obama tell us how important jobs are. Over the following two days, we were reminded of 9/11 and terrorism. If we add all that together, it makes the green economy even more important, as we will have greater concerns about whether there is enough money to create the jobs or to keep the economy going so that we have no terrorism at all. We have to get that balance right. We have to get it correct, because we must not forget the green economy. Therefore, I go back to my point: we need a seismic shift towards a green economy so that every decision we make leads in that direction.

I want to take a slightly different route from the other Members who have spoken and concentrate on getting this institution to do — that is, to take the action that creates jobs and to rewire the economy so that it goes green. I read the brief that we had this weekend. It is all very highbrow; it is all motherhood and apple pie. There is very little action in it and very little listing of what should be done and whether we should be buying 200 turbines, planting 10,000 trees or borrowing £200 million. We, in the Chamber, need to get on, produce action lists and start making things happen on the ground.

The documents are full of beautiful prose, but we are not good at producing or having the skill to produce the plans that make it work. We need a timetable, we need to see those plans on the ground, and this institution needs to start specialising in making things happen. When people say, “No”, let us ensure that it becomes, “Yes, let us find a way of doing it”. We need action plans.

We have some targets, but let us have more targets. One target is to have 15% of energy consumed from renewable resources by 2020 or 12% by 2012. However, we need to do that in much more detail. We need to have targets so that we can achieve.

I sat at the alternative energy table at an Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) conference, where half were for wind farms and half were not. We cannot go on discussing and arguing endlessly. We must produce actions and make decisions based on the information that we have today. We should have targets for hydro, wind, biomass energy, geothermal — I could go on. We need a broad mix. Let us have the decision, and let us have the actions on the ground.

We need to improve our planning system. I have been lobbied hard by alternative energy groups who cannot get their planning through because there are too many little details that need to be resolved. Let us find a way of fast-tracking it and making the rules less cumbersome.

The brief also said that we needed rigorous prioritisation of the activities. Exactly; let us see that happening. Let us see people in all government buildings looking at better ways of using energy. Let us look at all our uses of land to see how we can do things differently. We have the experts on the new wind turbines here in Harland & Wolff. Let us improve our skills and get back to action plans, timetables and

a short-, medium- and long-term set of plans. However, we must ensure that we are dynamic and flexible and, most importantly, that we deliver. If we borrow from Obama, we should start working together and start doing. Let us all ensure that no becomes yes. The UUP supports making the green economy a priority.

Mr Speaker: As we are approaching Question Time, I propose to suspend the debate. The first Member to speak after Question Time will be Alban Maginness.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Regional Development

Cycling

1. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the road infrastructure improvement programmes designed to improve protection of the growing number of cyclists using the roads network. (AQO 249/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): I am grateful to the Member for his question. The Member and, indeed, the House, will agree that it is always a great tragedy when lives are lost on our roads. I was deeply saddened to learn of the recent deaths of two cyclists in April and August of this year. Of course, we had the more recent tragedies of the motorcyclists Wayne Hamilton and Adrian McFarland who, I understand, is being laid to rest later this afternoon. My thoughts and deepest sympathies go out to the families and friends of all of those people.

I stress that Roads Service is committed to providing safer roads for the growing number of road users, including cyclists and pedestrians, by using a range of measures, such as road safety engineering, traffic calming and enhancement of the pedestrian and cycling network. I recognise very much the benefits to be obtained from infrastructure investment in the short term through construction employment and, in the long term, as a catalyst for wider economic growth combined with the obvious environmental and health benefits of incorporating cycling into an integrated transport system.

The longer term Roads Service target for cycling is laid out in the Belfast metropolitan transport plan and identifies a Northern Ireland-wide target to quadruple the number of trips by cycle by the end of 2015. I am entirely committed to seeking to achieve that target. Cycling has benefited from several years of investment, and the cycling infrastructure laid out in the Belfast metropolitan transport plan is well established. In the 10-year period including this financial year, Roads Service will have invested £8.6

million in the provision of 225 kilometres of cycle lanes.

Mr Speaker: I should have alerted the House to the fact that questions 5 and 6 have been withdrawn. I remind Ministers of the Standing Order on the two minute limit. I know that I give Ministers some latitude round it, but I am reminding them.

Mr A Maginness: Minister, I think everybody will be appreciative of your words in relation to those cyclists and motorcyclists who have lost their lives. It is appropriate to make those comments. In order to encourage cycling, one has to make roads safe. I appreciate and welcome the Minister's commitment to quadrupling the number of cyclists on our roads. How many kilometres of cycling lanes have been built this year in order to achieve that target?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. I am also mindful of the advice from the Speaker. After recent events within the Member's party, I wondered whether he would take the opportunity to indicate his line of thought. Perhaps he could use a cycling analogy to say whether, at this point, he wanted to ride to the rescue of the SDLP or, at least, get his spoke in. *[Laughter.]* I will ensure that the Member receives the information that he has requested as quickly as possible.

Mr Spratt: I too sympathise with the families of those who have lost their lives on the roads recently. The Minister recognised the very valuable amount that cycling puts into the local economy. You can see that when you look at well used cycle routes, such as the greenway and the towpath in my constituency. Will the Minister consider a long-term strategy to create more cycle ways and paths to increase the contribution to the local economy?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his contribution. I very much agree. My Department does indeed promote sustainable modes of transport, including cycling, through its Travelwise initiative. Travelwise expenditure during the annual Bike Week campaigns, which relate solely to the promotion of cycling, has seen year-on-year increases over the past four years. My Department is also working on a draft active travel strategy, which is being brought forward under the guidance of the active travel forum. That draft strategy is expected to be issued for consultation later this year.

I can tell the Member that £3.3 million of capital funding has been secured to fund demonstration projects over the next four years, and the provision of cycling infrastructure will be considered as part of those projects.

Mr Beggs: I understand that investment in cycling was cut in the Budget that was approved earlier this year. Does the Minister recognise that cycling reduces congestion, has environmental benefits, and has health benefits for people such as me who occasionally cycle? Will he be arguing with his colleagues that other Ministers should recognise the cross-departmental benefits that come from cycling?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member, who is indeed no mean cyclist himself. I got on my bike earlier this summer, and enjoyed it, for a limited period, of course.

There are significant challenges with the agreed budget that my Department has to work through and manage. That will reflect on some of the initiatives that we would have preferred to have done and would like to do. I will continue, of course, through monitoring rounds or any other opportunities, to try to improve the overall finance situation, with cycling and other transport issues in mind.

Ms Lo: One of the cyclists that the Minister mentioned recently lost his life tragically on the Ormeau Bridge. The daily flow of cyclists down the Ormeau Road is about 400. The majority of those cyclists go on the footpath, because it is too dangerous for them to go on the road. It is not really about how many miles of cycle lanes we build, it is about where those cycle lanes should be. Will the Minister urgently look at that stretch of road, which is the main arterial route into Belfast?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her contribution. I am mindful of the sensitivities after that tragedy, and I do not want to specifically refer to that incident. I hear what the Member asks. Obviously, the paramount concern of my Department has to be safety. I will look again at that particular stretch of road, with officials, to see whether any further improvements can be brought forward.

Aviation Strategy

2. **Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he intends to respond to the review of the aviation strategy, and if so,

if he will ask that consideration be given to the development of an all-Ireland aviation strategy to remove inefficiencies and competitive disadvantage. (AQO 250/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Mr Deputy Speaker — sorry, Mr Speaker. Demoted on your first day back.

Aviation, as the Member will know, is a reserved matter. My Department has been assisting the Department for Transport in London in its work to develop a new UK policy framework for aviation by March 2013. The policy development process is in its early stages, and my Department has been encouraging Northern Ireland's aviation stakeholders to respond to the Department for Transport's current consultation on a scoping document designed to shape the main elements of the new strategy. I am monitoring that process to ensure that Northern Ireland's specific aviation interests are being properly addressed.

As to the suggestion of an all-Ireland aviation strategy, I do not share the Member's enthusiasm for that and do not intend to progress it.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer, although I am sure that he is as aware as everyone in the House of the real challenges that air passenger duty imposes on our regional airports. Will he reflect on the fact that it would be very much in the interests of our regional airports — not just to their development but to their very survival — if air passenger duty could be included in the context of an updated aviation strategy? Perhaps he will rethink his approach.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I am not sure at which party he sought to love or cherish me, but, nonetheless, he raised the issue of air passenger duty. Of course, there is widespread concern in Northern Ireland's airports about that issue. It is a revenue and taxation matter, which is being pursued by Executive colleagues in the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). I am aware of that issue and seek to see it resolved as quickly as possible. As I have indicated, I do not share the Member's enthusiasm for an all-island approach at this point. We would be sensible to wait for the outcome of the consultation by the Department for Transport in London, seek to

influence that and then bring things forward at that point.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for his emphatic response in respect of any all-Ireland aviation strategy. In the assistance that he will offer to central government in discussions about an aviation strategy, will he ensure that a much more practical approach will be taken, rather than a political strategy, and that the close proximity that we have in all of Northern Ireland to Ayrshire and the Strathclyde region will be looked at rather than looking at Cork, Limerick and the Republic?

Mr Kennedy: I accept the point that the Member makes. It is a well-made point. We want to concentrate on how that strategy will impact on Northern Ireland airports in particular and on the travelling public of Northern Ireland. That will be the first useful part of the work, and I assure him that we will bring those issues to the fore.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister accept that there has been a gross distortion to air passenger traffic through Northern Ireland airports in recent times because of air passenger tax? Given that two Irish aviation companies — Ryanair and Aer Lingus — operate out of Northern Ireland, would it not make sense if some moves were made to try to align what is happening in the North and what is happening in the Republic so that we are not at a continued economic disadvantage?

Mr Kennedy: I understand the point that the Member makes, and I draw his attention again to the fact that air passenger duty is not primarily an issue for my Department. Obviously, I have an interest in it, and we continue to be apprised of progress on the issue, but it is a revenue and taxation matter. I understand its implications, and they are potentially serious, but I am aware that Executive colleagues, including the First Minister and deputy First Minister and other Executive Ministers, are making active representations to find a resolution to it.

Mr Agnew: Regardless of whether we have a national aviation strategy, a regional aviation strategy or an all-Ireland aviation strategy, will the Minister ensure that any such strategy protects the needs of residents living close to city airports and/or under the flight paths?

Mr Kennedy: The Member raises some of the key issues that will impact locally on the

eventual outcome of such a strategy, and we are all aware, from a constituency point of view or from a departmental or ministerial point of view, of the concerns of many people, but everything has to be considered in the round, and that is how I intend to approach the issue.

Roads: Newry and Armagh

3. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the total spend on minor road maintenance in the Newry and Armagh constituency in the last 12 months.
(AQO 251/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the Member's question. Roads Service's annual accounts for 2010-11 have yet to be laid before the Assembly and, as such, are still subject to audit adjustment. Therefore, I regret that I am not yet in a position to release details of spend in that financial year, but it is anticipated that the annual accounts will be cleared within the next few weeks. However, I will confirm that this year's maintenance budget for Roads Service's Newry and Mourne section is £6.4 million, and the Armagh section is £7.1 million.

I appreciate that those sections cover a high proportion of the road network in Northern Ireland as well as areas of the Newry and Armagh constituency, but I assure the Member that funding for those areas is distributed in a fair and equitable way on the basis of need.

2.45 pm

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his reply. Does he accept that, given the state of many rural roads, it is imperative that the budget be increased to keep those roads up to standard?

Mr Kennedy: As someone who shares the same constituency as the Member and sees at first hand the impact of the lack of structural maintenance, I have great sympathy for his argument. The budget that I inherited and am now expected to manage has a shortfall of some £210 million for structural maintenance over the next four years, which is obviously a huge sum of money. It will be particularly difficult over the next couple of years. However, I will of course make representations during monitoring rounds and will keep bringing the issue to the attention of Executive colleagues.

The Executive continue to take decisions, and their most recent decision on student fees,

aside from its merits, means that my budget has been cut further. That will undoubtedly reflect in some shape or form on roads maintenance. We are all aware of the competing priorities. I am patently aware of the need to maintain a road infrastructure that makes it safe for people to travel on the roads of Northern Ireland.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I was wondering whether the Minister travelled on the Tullyherron Road during his freewheeling this summer. If he did so, he will be aware of how bad the road surface is. I know that representations have been made to him on the issue in the past and, indeed, that he attended a site meeting there. Will the Minister undertake to have that road surveyed with a view to ensuring that its surface is improved?

Mr Kennedy: I compliment the Member on his stalking abilities in respect of my movements throughout the constituency. *[Laughter.]* I am aware of the Tullyherron Road and will make further enquiries, on a proper ministerial basis, into the present situation there. The Member knows that there is a huge network of roads in the Newry and Armagh constituency and, indeed, in other parts of Northern Ireland. Resources have been significantly trimmed, and we therefore have to make the best use of the money available. I know that the local section engineers Cindy Noble and her counterpart in the Armagh office, John Hall, are doing their level best with their staff to achieve as many structural improvements to those minor roads as possible and will continue to do so.

Mr McCallister: Has the Minister raised with his ministerial colleagues the wisdom of proceeding to invest so much in one single road project while he struggles to maintain the existing road network?

Mr Kennedy: The Member is a party colleague and will know that his question is largely led by the future of the A5 project, which I am not in a position to comment on. We are awaiting the outcome of the public inquiry. I understand entirely his point and the logic behind it. However, it would be unwise and improper of me to speculate in advance of the outcome of the inspector's report on how we will move forward.

Belfast Rapid Transit System

4. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the plans and timescale for Belfast's rapid transit system.
(AQO 252/11-15)

13. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on his Department's rapid transport proposals for Belfast.
(AQO 261/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 4 and 13 together. My Department is currently preparing an outline business case due for completion in 2012 that will identify the preferred options for a bus-based Belfast rapid transit system for the network routes, a procurement strategy, a commercial business model and a fair system.

As part of that outline business case process, a 12-week public consultation exercise will commence in October 2011. In the initial weeks of the consultation, public exhibitions will be held in east and west Belfast and in the city centre. That will give everyone the opportunity to view proposals, ask questions and make comments, which will assist my Department in planning the system. Following completion of the outline business case, DFP and Executive approval to proceed will be sought. Funding for the planning and commencement of initial implementation measures for Belfast rapid transit is included in the budget for 2011-12 to 2014-15.

Proposals for the Belfast rapid transit system include the provision of park-and-ride sites at key locations in the east and west of the city. One of the proposed locations, in Dundonald, will enable the use of the rapid transit system by those who commute from the Strangford constituency. The target date for the operation of the system is 2017. That is, of course, dependent on the availability of funding in the next budget period. At the appropriate time, my Department will bid for the required resources.

Later in September, I intend to make a study visit, along with members of the Committee for Regional Development, Belfast City Council, Lisburn City Council and Castlereagh Borough Council, to Nantes to see at first hand the operation of an integrated bus-based rapid transit system that is similar to the one proposed for Belfast.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Go raibh maith agaibh, a Cheann Comhairle agus a Aire. I am delighted to hear that progress on the work is still ongoing. I appreciate, as the Minister said, that the consultation will open in October. It is an important project for the city; not only for the west and the east, but for the entire city of Belfast. Obviously, it is hoped that it will create employment opportunities for one of the most deprived areas of Belfast, namely my constituency of West Belfast.

With regard to bids that the Minister will propose for the rapid transit system, will he reiterate when he foresees that the system will be complete in the Belfast area?

Mr Kennedy: I accept the supplementary question that the Member has posed. I understand his interest in the issue. We met recently to look at such matters. However, I am loathe to give specific dates. Promises and indicators of timings that are not, perhaps, being met — and I can think of a significant one at this stage — seem to be a problem for the entire Executive at present. That causes considerable unrest among Members and the wider community. As things stand, 2017 is the target date. However, that is very much an aspiration and is subject to available finance.

Mr Lyttle: I, too, welcome the Minister's update on the Belfast rapid transit system. Modern, fast and efficient public transport will be much welcomed in Belfast. Given the Minister's stated aim to enhance Northern Ireland's existing cycle network, will he assure the House that the excellent Comber greenway dedicated cycle and walkway in east Belfast will not be considered as one of the preferred routes for the system?

Mr Kennedy: I hear what the Member says. I understand why he makes that point. I will consider it in due course.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that the project and plan that he has inherited from his predecessor is not, in fact, for a rapid transit system for Belfast? The system is for west and east Belfast with no inclusion of south and north Belfast? Does the Minister plan to include north Belfast? If not, what assurances can he give the House and the people of north Belfast that in years to come they will have a transport system that will allow them to travel to the city centre

and to other parts of the city as easily as those from east and west Belfast?

Mr Kennedy: I hear what the Member says and the passion with which he makes his point. Certainly, the intention is that we will create a rapid transit system for the city of Belfast that makes it easier for all of its citizens and visitors to gain speedy access to their various destinations whether it is for business, retail, tourism or other purposes.

I will be interested in the experience in Nantes. It is helpful that councils such as Belfast City Council, Castlereagh Borough Council and Lisburn City Council, as well as members of the Regional Development Committee, will be able to get an up-to-date sense and proper assessment of a model that we could potentially apply to Belfast and that would help all its citizens.

Mr Copeland: I thank the Minister for his indulgence with the questions. I, too, to a degree, echo Mr Lyttle's sentiment regarding the Comber greenway. I seek the Minister's assurance that, when arriving at a balance, importance will be attached not only to the money and the interests that will benefit from the decision as and when it is taken, but to the voice of the individual citizens who live on the fringes of these developments and may not always share the corporate vision of the future from their own little place. It is vital that progress is something that is done for us all, rather than being done by some of us to some of us.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for the view that he has expressed. I hope that I am still considered to be reasonably balanced in my judgements, and I seek to continue that consistency in dealing with an issue of this nature.

Mr Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Roads: Strangford

7. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he will increase his Department's budget for the repair of potholes in roads in the Strangford constituency. (AQO 255/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Roads Service has advised that, in distributing the resources available for road maintenance, it makes allocations to the four Roads Service divisions on the basis of need, using a range of indicators. Roads

Service divisions use similar indicators when apportioning budgets across council areas, and I am satisfied that allocations are made on the basis of need in a fair and equitable way.

The Member will join me in welcoming the work under way in Kircubbin on the Parsonage Road as well as the work recently completed on the Deer Park Road.

Mr McCarthy: I am delighted to hear the Minister throw up to me about Kircubbin and Deer Park Road in Portaferry. Well done, Minister. It has been a long, long time in coming. Keep up the good work; there is much more to be done.

Does the Minister agree that it would be much better for his Department to fill in potholes and uneven surfaces before people are hurt, cars are damaged and the Department has to pay huge amounts in compensation?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his contribution. Of course, he is a man of many roads, and on an ongoing basis he raises them with me.

I take the point that structural maintenance is important: we had that debate earlier in response to one of the questions. The Member will know that the budget that I have to operate within is being significantly affected as a result of savings to be made. Over the next four years, I am losing £210 million from the maintenance budget, which clearly will mean pressures.

I am very confident, as I mentioned earlier, about the road section engineers in the Newry and Armagh area, and I am equally confident that both Stanley Lamb in Ards and Steven Duffy in the Down office will attempt to manage the situation as best they possibly can for all roads in their network.

Employment and Learning

Mr Speaker: Questions 6 and 10 have been withdrawn.

Queen's University, Belfast and Stranmillis University College: Merger

1. **Mr S Anderson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the proposed discontinuance of Stranmillis

University College and the suggested merger with Queen's University, Belfast.
(AQO 264/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): As the Member will know, a public consultation was carried out on the proposal earlier this year, and the responses received were discussed with the Committee for Employment and Learning.

However, several key stakeholder groups have subsequently requested meetings with me to discuss the proposal, and arrangements are being made to facilitate those. I expect to be able to make a decision shortly.

3.00 pm

Mr S Anderson: I thank the Minister for his response. I know from my contacts with academic staff at Stranmillis that they are strongly opposed to the proposed merger and that morale there is extremely low at present. Will the Minister confirm that there will be legislative guarantees to protect the continued delivery of the religious education curriculum? If the new college operates under the Queen's University Belfast (QUB) charter of 1908, which is non-denominational, how will that work in practice?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Anderson for his supplementary question. It is important to stress that, while Stranmillis is a non-denominational college, its student population has traditionally come from a Protestant background, and most go on to find employment in the controlled sector. In response to the consultation document, the Transferor Representatives' Council made significant representations on that. Certainly, the ethos of Stranmillis — we can have a discussion about what exactly that entails and how it is defined — will be carried through and reflected in the merger, if indeed that is what we take forward. Proper consideration will be given, through a stakeholder group, to all the different faith interests.

Ms Gildernew: Will the proposed merger lead to savings for the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), and can that money be used to offset other pressures in the Department?

Dr Farry: The key points to stress in relation to Stranmillis are the urgent need for investment in the college and that it needs to be made financially sustainable. I stress that the only viable means by which that can be done seems

to be the proposed merger with Queen's University. We are talking about some £16 million being necessary for capital improvement. I toured the estate last week and saw for myself the very dilapidated state of some buildings. Indeed, some buildings have been condemned and are beyond use. In the event that the merger does not go ahead, that shortfall in capital investment will have to be found. There is no money available — we discussed student finance today — so that is going to be sitting there as an unaddressed and unresolved issue if we do not get the merger moving.

Mr McDevitt: I join the Minister in acknowledging the need for investment on the Stranmillis college site, and I welcome his commitment to identifying and acknowledging that need. Specifically, will the Minister give the House a commitment that teacher training will continue at both Stranmillis and St Mary's teacher training college for the foreseeable future and that that will remain the policy of his Department?

Dr Farry: Queen's University, Stranmillis and St Mary's are all independent institutions, and decisions on the future are for them to take. Funding will be made, as appropriate, to all those institutions. At this stage, we have the potential for a merger between Stranmillis and Queen's University to create the Stranmillis school of education at Queen's. That is certainly something that we are focused on at the moment.

Mr Allister: As I understand it, Minister, the only vote that this Assembly will have if the merger proceeds is on the order to discontinue Stranmillis. Will you give an undertaking that, to enhance democratic control, the vote will be taken at a sufficiently early stage to make a difference, that it will be determinative and that it will not simply be presented as a fait accompli if and when this destructive merger is presented?

Dr Farry: I certainly would not describe the merger as destructive in any sense, shape or form. It is something that the board of governors of Stranmillis requested on a unanimous basis, and, indeed, there is significant support for it from the staff. I make a commitment that whatever is required by way of legislation to get it through will be done. I am certainly very happy that the Assembly address the issue at the earliest opportunity, and I intend to make a decision

formally on the matter in the very near future and to set the wheels in motion in that regard.

EU Agency Workers Directive

2. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline how his Department will implement the EU agency workers directive to reflect the particular circumstances of this region. (AQO 265/11-15)

Dr Farry: In August this year, the Department published its response to the public consultation on the agency workers directive, which sets out in some detail how the Department will transpose the directive in Northern Ireland. It addresses a number of specific local concerns that were raised by stakeholders, who included the Assembly Committee for Employment and Learning and Members of the Assembly.

One of the key elements in the transposition will be the inclusion of a 12-week qualifying period before the equal treatment provisions of the directive will apply. That, I believe, finds the optimum balance between affording agency workers additional employment rights and mitigating the financial impact of the directive on local businesses, many of which come from Northern Ireland's small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) sector. Officials are currently working with representatives of agency workers, the recruitment sector and employers to develop guidelines on the practical application of the directive's regulations, which will specifically address local requirements. Finally, as is required under the directive's review provisions, my Department will actively monitor the effectiveness of the implementation arrangements, taking account of the views of stakeholders. A copy of the Department's full response is available on our website, and I will ensure that the Member is provided with a copy.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response, and I look forward to seeing the rest of the information. Is the Minister in a position to advise the House of how many workers will be affected by such a transposition?

Dr Farry: It will benefit a significant number of people. However, we must ensure that there is also flexibility for business. That is why the 12-week qualifying period is so important, as it will allow businesses the flexibility to respond

rapidly to different labour needs. However, it is important that the real protections come in in the longer term and as workers bed down. In practice, those workers are the same and should be treated the same as others who work in those organisations on a more formal basis.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister spoke about the specific needs of Northern Ireland's private sector. Will he be specific and define those needs and tell me how he intends to shape the directive to meet those needs?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Nesbitt for his question. The policy has already been discussed during a debate in the Assembly, and it was endorsed by the Executive as a whole. We reflected the parameters of the national agreement on a UK-wide level, which was negotiated between the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the Trades Union Congress (TUC). There was a particular issue with those negotiations, because the local trade unions are not formally part of the TUC structure. However, I have highlighted that and responded to it.

We have reflected the overall balance between the needs of business and the interests of workers. In the absence of the 12-week qualifying period, the costs to businesses would have risen significantly, with hundreds of millions of pounds in additional costs. What we have done is good news for business and for workers.

Mrs D Kelly: The Minister made the point about recognition being given to the trade unions in Ireland. What specific weight will he give to their concerns and issues, such as rights to maternity leave?

Dr Farry: The interests of the trade unions locally will be fully taken into account in implementing the directive, and I have already given that commitment. There is a specific issue about how we got into this situation as a result of the national discussions and the slight anomaly of the local trade unions not being part of the TUC. I have written to the Minister responsible for employment law at a UK-wide level to highlight our situation.

Members may be interested to note that Northern Ireland is the only devolved region to which employment has been devolved, with Scottish and Welsh employment matters still being run out of London. It is important that we make our voice known in wider national discussions.

Ms Lo: I very much support better protection for agency workers, but I also understand that it may deter some employers from employing workers from the EU. Does the Department have any means whereby it can monitor the level of recruitment and reflect on that to help employers to cope better with the directive?

Dr Farry: I thank my colleague for her question. The Department is very willing to work closely with business, trade unions and other representative groups to ensure the smooth implementation of the directive. It is a complex issue, which applies in many different respects, and the interests of all stakeholders will certainly be taken into account. We are also happy to review matters and come back to the House if that is deemed to be appropriate.

Queen's University, Belfast and Stranmillis University College: Merger

3. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the concerns submitted by St Mary's University College regarding the proposed discontinuance of Stranmillis University College and the suggested merger with Queen's University, Belfast. (AQO 266/11-15)

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Maskey for his question. The concerns raised by St Mary's University College were in its response to the public consultation document on the proposed merger between Stranmillis and Queen's University. The college stated that, before any decisions are made:

"The protection of the tradition, values and ethos of St Mary's (in the context of preserving educational diversity and pluralism in Northern Ireland) should be taken into account."

It also commented that the college's traditions, values and ethos and its relationship with the maintained sector should be protected in legislation passed at the same time as legislation enabling the merger. I am due to meet Mr Maskey in the near future to discuss those issues, and I look forward to our meeting.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I appreciate that that meeting will take place soon, but I will try to tease out some further stuff prior to it. There are concerns, and, if there is no proper engagement or consultation, a bit of a fear factor can sometimes be created. Sometimes it may

be the case or it may not be the case, but people have an understanding of that. Such consultation should continue and on a much larger scale than it has up to this point. Is there a possibility that St Mary's itself can increase its student intake?

Dr Farry: St Mary's is an autonomous body under law, and the Department very much respects that. It has its own governing body, and it determines its future strategic direction. Its views on the way forward are very well known.

As regards student numbers, I stress that we are training too many teachers in Northern Ireland. That leads to frustration at the other end when people are not able to access employment locally. So I think that we need to look realistically at how we manage student flows and expectations and respect the range of institutions that work in this area.

The numbers of teachers going through the system are actually determined by the Department of Education rather than by my Department, although my Department ultimately picks up the cost. Given the various pressures that I face, I am keen to discuss the issue with my colleague Mr O'Dowd in the very near future.

Mr Speaker: Once again, I remind Members that they need to rise in their place if they want to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for referring to the fact that we train too many teachers. He concluded those comments by mentioning a meeting with the Education Minister. Does he accept that it is untenable for one Department to continue to set the numbers and for another to pick up the tab, given the way in which St Mary's intake figures have been dealt with over the past number of years? Will he give an undertaking to the House that he will look at the issue of the duplication of teacher training provision in Northern Ireland? As is the case in education, those structures will be untenable in further and higher education in the future.

Dr Farry: I have several comments to make. I am very eager to discuss the issue with John O'Dowd, because I think that we need to come to terms with it. Against that, I would say that I am committed to ensuring that we train teachers in Northern Ireland for the fullest range of situations that they will face. Whether that needs to be done through separate institutions or whether it can be done through single bodies

is a debate that we can have. Certainly, we need to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to teacher training, and I suggest that there may be a number of ways in which that can be taken forward. In saying that, of course, we have to work closely with the different autonomous institutions, respect their independence and engage with them constructively to find a way forward for teacher training in Northern Ireland that we can all sustain and stand over in the years to come.

Mr D McIlveen: Does the Minister's last answer mean that, if a proposed merger went ahead, there would be facility to make Protestant teachers fully qualified to teach in Roman Catholic maintained schools?

Dr Farry: Let me put it this way: there is a very distinct ethos in the Catholic maintained sector in issues of pastoral care and so on. However, a lot of the subjects that are taught, whether in a Catholic maintained school or a different school, are reflected in the common curriculum under which we all work. Whether a teacher is from a Protestant or a Catholic background and whether he or she is straight, gay or a member of an ethnic minority is irrelevant, provided that they are a professional teacher who is capable of teaching the same core curriculum in the various settings that we have. However, the issue around such regulation is not one for my Department: it lies under equality law, which is for the Office of the First and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) to take forward.

3.15pm

Benefits

4. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline his Department's links with the Department for Social Development in relation to the reassessment of people in receipt of sickness and incapacity benefits. (AQO 267/11-15)

Dr Farry: I thank Lord Morrow for his question. My Department has a key role to play in getting people back to work and has a complementary project in support of the Department for Social Development's Social Security Agency's reassessment project. The aim is to ensure that an appropriate level of support is available to individuals who move from incapacity benefit to the employment and support allowance or jobseeker's allowance, to help them to prepare for and move into employment.

Moving from incapacity benefit to employment and support allowance can be considered a positive step and is designed to help everyone who is able to work to move from benefits into employment. Research has shown that work increases confidence, health, well-being and self-esteem, as well as benefiting the economy.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for his welcome answer. I have a supplementary question about what might change around disability. Will the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 be applicable and protected in all cases where there are changes as a result of anything that will happen in the days ahead?

Dr Farry: It is useful to draw a distinction between the two roles that are played. A lot of the assessment is done through the Social Security Agency, and there has to be sensitivity towards disability issues. We need to be sensitive about how we engage with people with disabilities in the employment service. The disability employment service is a distinct strand within the overall employment service that provides a full range of support for those with health-related conditions to find and stay in work.

If someone has a disability, we have to be sensitive and recognise that. Equally, however, we should not write them off. Whether it is a mental issue, a physical issue or a combination of both, there are many people who can make a contribution to work and would like the opportunity to do so. That may not necessarily be a nine-to-five job, five days a week; it may be part-time work. The forthcoming reforms may make that a little bit easier.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I listened to the Minister speaking on the radio last week about the 76,000 people who are being migrated from incapacity benefit to jobseeker's allowance. He certainly tried to seem positive, and he said that it would take approximately three years for this to reach fruition. One concern shared by claimants and stakeholders in this area is about what training staff will be given to deal with people with particular mental health problems and other disabilities, such as autism and so on. Can the Minister reassure us that such people will be dealt with in a proper and sensitive manner?

Dr Farry: I am happy to give Mr Brady that reassurance. Those are similar questions to the ones that I asked myself as our policy

around service delivery was being formulated. I am sensitive to the fact that the population in Northern Ireland, particularly those in receipt of benefits, is diverse. It is important that staff are trained in understanding the complex needs that people have. I echo the point that we should not write people off just because they have mental health conditions. The employment service is about encouraging people back to work, not forcing them into it. The focus will be on employability skills in the first instance and giving people confidence that they can consider new challenges rather than feeling that they have to step out of the workplace for ever.

Mrs Overend: Employment services seem to be underfunded. Will the Minister confirm whether he has allocated or set aside funding to be sufficiently able to deal with the increase in the number of people seeking work? Does he have enough staff to deal with the increase, or will he recruit more staff for employment services?

Dr Farry: I thank Mrs Overend for that question. It is true that our employment service is under severe strain. We are currently configured to deal with around 35,000 people in relation to jobseeker's allowance, and we are currently pushing towards 61,000 claimants on the books. Clearly, that puts pressure on staff. On top of that, we have to deal with the forthcoming migration from incapacity benefit. We have secured some additional resources through the Executive and through the Social Security Agency, which will assist us in increasing the number of staff and providing a better service to people. However, it is important that I stress the sheer scale of the challenges facing us. Over the months to come, when we start developing future work programmes in line with wider welfare reform in the rest of the UK, those challenges will become even more acute. Although we can maintain parity at the moment in the level of benefits that are paid out, parity also applies to the level of service that we provide in Northern Ireland, and there is a real question that we will have to face as an Executive and Assembly over the months to come about how we sustain that.

Higher Education: Tuition Fees

5. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when he will announce his decision on the future of student tuition fees. (AQO 268/11-15)

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Kinahan for his question, and I am happy to answer questions 5 and 10, although I think that question 10 has been withdrawn.

As Members will be aware, I made a statement to the Assembly this morning which contained full details of the position on tuition fees, student support and the funding of the higher education system in Northern Ireland.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer, and I apologise for not hearing him this morning, but I am fairly certain that I am touching on an issue that was not fully explored. Does the Minister agree that a modest rise to, say, £4,500 per student would have been affordable and would have given his Department and other Departments more resources, particularly for apprenticeships?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Kinahan for his question. It is probably a brave question to ask in the manner that he did. The budget that I inherited as Minister was premised on fees being introduced at a level of £4,500. Obviously, the attraction of an increase in fees would have been to bring additional resources into the system in Northern Ireland, and it would perhaps have avoided to some extent either the Executive or my Department identifying other resources to make up the shortfall. However, I think that it is fair to say that there was no political consensus in Northern Ireland for any rise in fees beyond the level of inflation. Once that was the political reality that we were working in, the issue was about confirming the budgetary support to enable the policy to move ahead. That is what the Executive achieved last Thursday.

Mr Humphrey: Unfortunately, I too missed the statement this morning, but I would like the Minister to assure the young people in the areas that I represent and those that adjoin them who are not seeking to go into third-level education at university but are looking to have vocational training in traditional trades and apprenticeships and to go into the world of work, industry, commerce, tourism and so on that they have a future as well. Can he assure the House that the freeze on tuition fees that he announced last week will not have an adverse effect on the courses that ensure the education of those young people and prepare them for the world of work in the years to come?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Humphrey for his question. I am very happy to stress that I am committed

to addressing the skills agenda in Northern Ireland across a broad front. Although that includes what happens in universities, it also includes further education, apprenticeships, essential skills and addressing issues regarding employability and those who are currently out of the labour force. I can also give a commitment that the funding package that I announced today has not come at all at the expense of what is currently invested in further education and those other areas. Of course, we have a wider and very challenging financial settlement overall but, in relation to this discrete issue, there is not a penny coming from any of those services to fund what I announced for higher education today.

Mr P Ramsey: I will follow on from my colleague's supplementary question. In relation to the statement to the House on fees, is it not correct that the Minister is depending on a saving of almost £20 million that will come out of the moneys that are set aside for young people in the education maintenance allowance? As my colleague pointed out, it is those young people who will be deprived of college places if that money is reduced. There are 40,000 people here who are not in employment, education or training, and the numbers are increasing. Will such a course of action not worsen the situation?

Dr Farry: It is worth stressing how the £40 million gap is being addressed, just to make sure that people fully understand the facts. The education and maintenance allowance (EMA) element, to which Pat Ramsey referred, comes out of the Executive's half of the overall equation. However, I particularly want to stress that any reform of EMA that will be taken forward by John O'Dowd and me will not be designed to stop anyone accessing further education or continuing their secondary education. We are wholly committed to and understand the rationale of ensuring that people from disadvantaged backgrounds are encouraged to stay in education.

The point that we are making is that there is significant inefficiency in the current EMA policy, and money is going to people who are telling surveys that it is not making a difference to their personal decision to stay in education. Those are resources that we are spending inefficiently as an Executive; in effect, they are what we call in economics a dead weight. Any reform of EMA is designed to capture that inefficiency; it is not designed to abolish the scheme at all or even

to stop people in the system who clearly benefit from it today. I fully expect that that will continue into the future.

Mr Lyttle: I join the House in welcoming the good news that has been delivered today. Does the Minister plan to undertake any work with his colleagues in the Executive, the Minister of Education and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure that people engage in sound career planning when they decide to take up further or higher education?

Dr Farry: I can report that I have very good relations with the Minister of Education and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Indeed, John O'Dowd and I have arranged to meet on a regular and recurring basis to discuss matters of common interest to our Departments. The issue of careers planning cuts across the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning. We have a careers strategy in place, and I am keen to review that strategy in light of a rapidly changing economic and educational situation in Northern Ireland. It is something that John O'Dowd and I will discuss in the near future.

Mrs Overend: The Minister has assured us of his commitment to upskilling the citizens of Northern Ireland. I want him to clarify what he said about needing to review the financing of students from Northern Ireland who may need to travel outside Northern Ireland to attend certain courses. He also said that he is unwilling to consider the financial implications of reviewing the financing of student funding here. Is that the case?

Dr Farry: I am not quite sure what I am supposed to review after having just announced policies today. As things stand, I intend to continue funding Northern Ireland students who go to Great Britain to allow them to borrow fees of £9,000 and cover the notional loan subsidy costs associated with that. Until we see what happens in practice, we do not know what the cost implications of that policy will be. I have made assumptions in my budget to enable that to move forward, but, if the actual trend is significantly ahead of what we have planned for, that will create an unaccounted cost pressure. In those circumstances I will certainly have a duty to review the policy. As things stand, rather than cut it off today, it is important that I preserve that choice and enable students to access courses in Great Britain, particularly

those that they cannot access here. I also recognise that, with increased demand for local places, there will be students who miss out who will benefit from higher education if they can go to Great Britain, provided that they promise to come back.

Mr Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

South Eastern Regional College: Killyleagh

7. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions he has had with the South Eastern Regional College regarding the use of its Killyleagh premises as a library. (AQO 270/11-15)

Dr Farry: I have had no discussions with the South Eastern Regional College about the use of its Killyleagh premises as a library. However, I am aware that there are ongoing discussions between the college and Libraries NI. Accommodation at Killyleagh, part of which is used by the library, transferred to the South Eastern Regional College at its incorporation. There has been significant investment in its other campuses, and the college considers the Killyleagh premises to be surplus to requirements for education purposes.

Libraries NI indicated that the future of Killyleagh Library will be determined as part of its strategic review. In an effort to be helpful, the South Eastern Regional College has agreed to await the outcome of that review before making any decision regarding the premises.

3.30 pm

Mr Hamilton: Now that I have drawn the issue to the Minister's attention, will he assure me and, more importantly, the users of Killyleagh Library that the South Eastern Regional College will do nothing to impede the maintenance and continuance of a library on the current site, if that is ultimately Libraries NI's decision?

Mr Speaker: I will allow the Minister a quick answer.

Dr Farry: The college is an independent body. I will certainly bring the matter to its attention, so it will hear what the Member just said.

Private Members' Business

Green Economy

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to make the development of the green economy a priority within the next Programme for Government and to affirm that an overarching strategy for the development of the green economy should be implemented; and further calls on the Executive to bring together existing policies and initiatives, to identify gaps and to address them. — [Ms Lo.]

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the motion and the debate, and I congratulate Ms Lo on bringing the motion to the Floor of the House.

Ireland, north and south, has a unique set of natural resources. We have wind aplenty — as we can see today — we are surrounded by the sea, and we have the ability to grow crops, such as grass, rapidly and well. That unique set of natural resources puts us in pole position to exploit the renewable energy agenda. We can use the wind, the sea and our natural vegetation to produce renewable energy. Most other European countries, particularly those in mainland Europe, do not have those advantages, so, given that unique set of natural resources, Northern Ireland has a particular advantage.

So what should the Assembly and the Executive be doing? We should be leading the charge. We should be setting the pace on the renewable energy agenda, which, of course, is an integral part of the green economy to which Ms Lo's motion refers. We have to energise the Executive to develop renewable energy and other aspects of the green agenda. We know that there is plenty of potential, so, given our circumstances — we are in recession, and our economy is in the doldrums and not growing as fast as it should — we should put every effort into developing the green agenda.

Earlier this year, the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which I chair, produced a report on renewable energy. The report presented a number of renewable energy issues to the Assembly, and anyone who believes in and is committed to that agenda should read the report. We said that there is enormous potential here and that a greater emphasis should be placed on developing all forms of renewable energy, not just wind. We said that we should diversify and that there is a need

to integrate energy policy and economic policy, because both go together. Furthermore, in order to develop the economy, the Committee wants us to develop indigenous energy resources. We have the potential, so we must use it.

The green new deal, which is a separate but related issue, is very ambitious. The Green New Deal Group's agenda is to produce a situation in which, over the next three years, more than 100,000 homes will be renovated to make them energy efficient.

That is an ambitious target, but we need to be ambitious. The Government have provided £12 million for that agenda, which is insufficient to deal with the problem of energy efficiency.

We have no control over our incomes in Northern Ireland. We have no control over the international price of energy, but we do have control over the development of energy efficiency in our homes and workplaces. The emphasis should be on that green new deal.

Ms Lo: I thank the Member for giving way. I had a conversation with members of the Bryson Charitable Group about the green new deal and retrofitting homes. It has plans for two pilot schemes, but those have been put on the backburner, and there is a question mark over them.

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

Mr A Maginness: That was a timely and worthwhile intervention. There should be a new look at the retrofitting of our homes for energy efficiency. It is one thing that we can control and is one way in which we, as an Assembly and an Executive, can reduce the level of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

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

Mr A Maginness: I will conclude there. I support the motion, and I think that the Committee generally supports it. I wish —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr A Maginness: — the Member well in promoting it.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún. I speak in favour of the motion. Given the present climate, if you mention the green economy and the green new deal, other

Departments and other areas will argue whether it should be a priority. However, there is an opportunity through the programme. We should look at new models and new ways to bring things forward to try to address the recession and the hard times that we are in, and the green economy is one method to do that.

In the previous Assembly term, scrutiny Committees challenged all Departments on their respective budgets and how they prioritised. Unfortunately, through the climate change debate that I experienced in the Committee for the Environment, we saw how Departments operated in silos. We all know that Departments have their responsibilities, but we saw that Departments reacted to things such as EU infractions in respect of the green new deal, waste infrastructure and everything else that is inclusive of the green economy. We saw that Departments only reacted rather than being proactive, so we need to get all Departments to work together across the board to try to address the issue. It is up to the Executive solely to bring that about. The motion states that we should bring together existing policies. There are some good policies, and good collaborative work has been done, from which we must learn. We have worked with statutory agencies. We do not need to reinvent the wheel, but there is work that we can continue.

I will touch on some of the points that will bring us forward. We need to introduce new innovative technologies. I was sad to hear my colleague talk about the Dutch firm that could not get people from here because they were not trained. We need to look at our universities. We are all talking about job losses and everything else. Surely there will come a point at which we need to train the young people who leave schools or universities and cannot get jobs. We need to look at that. I would like to think that some work has been done in that field, because I believe that they have a contribution to make.

On the issue of EU regulations in respect of the environment —

Mr Newton: Is it not somewhat hypocritical of the Member's party to support the motion while having a policy that is opposed to energy from waste?

Mr Boylan: No, it is not. We are talking about the green economy and bringing forward new models. Earlier, the Member talked about the market. I do not know whether he said "market-

based" or "market-led". There needs to be competition, as he mentioned to my colleague earlier.

Mr Newton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: No, I have already given way. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor, and he has taken an intervention already. The Member will have a minute added to his time.

Mr Boylan: I will let the Member clarify his point, as long as he is quick.

Mr Newton: I will read out what I said so that there is no ambiguity:

"a green economy cannot be market-led. Green economies require two things: a decrease in the overall quantity of goods being produced and an increase in democratic decisions about the production of goods."

Market economies do neither.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I will go back to the point about open competition. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Boylan: I cannot see how it is open competition when those businesses have not even been established yet.

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: No, I cannot. I want to make this very important point. We have heard all of the ideas that have come forward, but one of the key issues is leadership in the Assembly, and I want to raise the matter of planning. This week, the Minister refused to adopt a planning policy, PPS 24, which would have gone some way to help with efficient and effective planning. There has been a failure to address the issue of the review of public administration (RPA). If we address RPA and the governance issue, we will be able to move planning to local councils and get more authority there.

We are talking about renewable energy and wind turbines, but the policy and the guidelines on those make development very difficult. We are promoting something that the policy does not facilitate. The Minister of the Environment has not addressed the issue of resources and aggregates mapping.

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

Mr Boylan: One of the key issues is planning. That is part of the debate, and I hope that the Minister will take that on board. I hope that all Ministers will play their part in bringing forward the green economy.

Mr Nesbitt: I welcome the opportunity to expand on the Ulster Unionist Party's policy on the economy. I have said previously that we believe that rebalancing is not a two-dimensional action involving purely the private sector and the public sector but that there is a third leg to the stool, namely the social economy. It is the so-called not-for-profit sector, although we see it as profitable, even if that profit is not measured in pounds and shillings. The profit comes in the development of individuals and communities. All three sectors must play their part if we are to exploit the potential of the green economy. We believe that the green economy should be a priority of the Programme for Government.

In the industrial revolution —

Mr A Maginness: Does the Member agree that not only should the green economy be a part of the Programme for Government but that we should have a Programme for Government? We have yet to see that.

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his intervention. I fear that he confuses me with the First Minister. I very much agree.

During the industrial revolution, Northern Ireland made its mark on the world stage by choosing its sectors: shipbuilding, linen and rope works. It is the job and the responsibility of the Executive to choose the sectors that will lead us to our next golden age.

I had the great honour and privilege some years ago to work as a consultant for Sir George Quigley during his time as chairman of the Institute of Directors when he came out with the big idea to establish an economic corridor between Belfast and Dublin — an eastern seaboard corridor to boost the private sector on the whole island. Today, we offer a modern twist on that proposal — a green economic corridor between Belfast harbour and the Ards peninsula.

3.45 pm

Before I am accused of being geocentric, let me say that there are probably seven good reasons why this makes sense. First, at one end of that corridor, Belfast harbour is currently investing some £50 million in an offshore wind logistics terminal for DONG Energy of Denmark, which will farm wind in the Irish Sea on a quite massive scale. Secondly, at the far end of the corridor, in the Strangford lough narrows is SeaGen, which is a world leader in tidal energy experimentation. Thirdly, in between, Portavogie is a once proud fishing village where the fleet has shrunk and struggled against the incessant and yearly demands of the EU for people there not to play their trade. However, with DONG coming on board, they see a bright future as part of that logistical supply chain into the Irish Sea.

Fourthly, the Ards campus of the South Eastern Regional College (SERC) is already embracing the green economy, and I am particularly impressed with its partnerships with the private sector through ventures that are eager to test the commercial viability of the campus's products. There is a clear synergy between the SERC in Ards and the development at Belfast harbour, particularly the composite research and development facility that is proposed there. Indeed, those two unlock the further potential for agglomeration economics, with the final aim of the green corridor becoming a UK centre of excellence for research and development and innovation for the green economy.

My seventh and final point is that those partnerships are ideal for unlocking EU backing, particularly through the seventh framework programme for research and technological development, FP7, which, as we all know, is worth some €50 billion in the coming years. That is an enormous cake, and, with something such as the green economy corridor, we could help ourselves to quite a slice.

I will finish with a quote from William Shakespeare that is apposite to green energy, particularly at sea. The bard said:

"There is a tide in the affairs of men.

Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;

Omitted, all the voyage of their life

Is bound in shallows and in miseries."

If the House is to provide the leadership that the people expect of us, it is time to catch that tide. I support the motion.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion, and I congratulate Anna Lo and the Alliance Party for bringing it to the House. The green economy is a very important issue, and the first question that I want to ask is why it has taken so long to come up. We should have started to put it in place in the early stages of the Executive. Unfortunately, that has not happened. When we had the Executive programme funds (EPFs), we suggested that the various Departments could be brought together to bring about a green economy in different ways to ensure the viability of different projects for the future.

However, this time, the Executive need to have a co-ordinating role across all the Departments, because, unfortunately, Departments still seem to operate a silo mentality, and we need to get an overarching role to ensure that the green economy can kick off. It has taken so long because the Department would not look outside the box and would not look at ideas bigger than what it had been doing for many years. As my colleague said, the Environment Committee needs to deal with the issue of planning, because every proposal that is put forward for either single wind turbines or for wind farms meets with opposition from everyone, and the planners are turning down most of those applications at the present time.

Farmers want to diversify and have the opportunity to create their own energy, and that is being turned down. Anaerobic digestion is the use of farm material — slurries — to create energy from waste. Energy is not obtained from waste just from an incinerator, as Robin Newtown indicated. That is not green energy; that is bad energy. That is stale, burned energy that is not good economy. We want to see a green economy, not one that is outdated, and incineration is of the past not the future. We need to look at the possibilities on farms to develop the use of waste to make energy, and that can be done in a simple way —

Mr Newton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Molloy: No, I will not. In the past, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has provided funding for tanks and silos in which to keep slurry. The next stage should be to fund anaerobic digestion

to use that waste to generate electricity. DARD also needs to support the development of energy on the farm, the use of that slurry, so it is not seen as waste but energy.

I go back to planning. Unless the Planning Service is more flexible in its approach and approves applications, we will not go forward on the green economy. It has to develop a new, flexible, encouraging approach and come up with strategies to do this. We are far behind the rest of Europe on this. We visited farms six years ago in Norway where slurry was collected to create energy to run the bus company and heat an entire village. All that is long-established practice in Europe, and we are, again, far behind.

European funding is available for those types of projects. We should be co-ordinating across Departments and linking with the countries across Europe to ensure that we maximise the support available from Europe for this. European funding is essential and it is important that Departments start to drawdown the maximum available, which Barroso identified as a means of funding future developments in this country. So, it is important to look towards the green economy. It is important that we start to get our studies in place to be able to make sure that we maximise it. The European Union is one aspect of trying to maximise the funding available to Departments and to the farming and rural community to make sure that they take best advantage of it.

Another issue relates to the Department for Social Development (DSD) and housing. At the moment, we have a bad Housing Executive policy that means we are down to a single fuel for heating a house, which many people are finding particularly difficult. Across Europe, it is compulsory to have dual-fuel systems in housing to prevent being confined to one form of fuel. We need to find ways to bring forward new environmentally friendly housing stock that has alternative heating systems and sustainable development as part of the infrastructure.

Hopefully, the motion will pass and we will start to get Departments coming forward with new ideas that will lead to a new solution and the green economy.

Mr Allister: The green economy is one of those fashionable topics to talk about, around which, when I listen to most discussions, I conclude that all critical faculties have been suspended. We have had some examples of that today.

The apple-pie aura that envelops it makes it unpopular to ask any difficult questions, but ask them I will. That is not because I oppose in any way a clean, efficient economy or a clean, efficient energy policy, but because I am concerned about what we can afford and what works. It is also because I refuse to be swept along by the green hysteria, and that is nothing to do with the colour, it is about the topic.

Look at our energy prices and ask how renewables have assisted. They have not. Some renewable energy sources are among the most expensive and inefficient. The wind is only of use when it blows. The drive forward into offshore wind energy will be the most expensive venture of all. Some use the whole green debate and hype it to such an extent that they get carried away into thinking that we have to put green taxes on everything. Now, if you want to fly, you pay exorbitant prices.

Mr Agnew: Does the Member not accept that all our energy sources, whether they are fossil fuel based or renewable energy — oil, gas or nuclear — have required subsidies?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Allister: Thank you. The subsidy is greatest on the renewables, compounding the energy cost situation. The EU has imposed wholly unrealistic targets on emissions, which has imposed huge costs on industry as we struggle through the worst recession in years.

I have not heard too much reference in the debate to any outside deliberations. However, I noticed that the TaxPayers' Alliance produced some interesting figures that show that the burden of green taxes and regulations is in excess of £26.4 billion. In large measure, that is driven by the increasing price on emissions under the trading policy and the increase in the costs that we as a nation must bear because of the renewables obligation. All of that increases electricity prices, which we have recently seen go through the roof again.

Spain's economy is worth considering. Under its socialist Government of a few years ago, it went head over heels for a massive green economy programme. Where is it today? An independent report commissioned in 2009 by the Juan de Mariana Institute demonstrated that every green job created in Spain cost 2.2 ordinary jobs because of the export of jobs that resulted from swingeing restrictions and the subsidies that

were directed towards the green economy. How many jobs are those in the House who advocate this policy going to create and how many are they going to lose? That is the question that few wish to face.

The USA introduced a green new deal in 2009. It promised to spark economic recovery and create three million jobs. Where are they? Since then, unemployment has increased. How is the great collective brain that is the local politic going to be able to do what the United States and Spain could not do? At the heart of all of this is responsible spending and learning to live within what is affordable. Jobs cannot be conjured up just by saying, "green new deal". Spain and the USA are testament enough to that.

Ms Lo: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Not at the moment.

Northern Ireland needs to see a dramatic fall in energy costs, and everything points the other way. One of the fuellers of that is the headlong, unthinking push for the green new deal. My goodness, we cannot even buy cheaper light bulbs any more. However, this motion calls for more of the same: more of the same crippling green taxation, more restraint on the operation of business, more jobs driven abroad and more increases in energy costs. I certainly do not. Therefore, I oppose the motion.

Mr Agnew: I hope to address some of Mr Allister's points, as well as to support the motion and promote the green economy. That will be no surprise to anyone. A green economy is characterised by resource efficiency, social inclusivity and low-carbon living. In other words, in a green economy, the needs of the economy, the people and the environment in which they live and work are balanced.

Investing in the green economy will help us to meet a number of policy objectives. Jobs can be created, and to back up my point I will refer to the housing documents of phase 1 of the green new deal that was produced by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and Friends of the Earth, which are among its member bodies.

They estimate that 10,000 to 15,000 jobs could be created or sustained in Northern Ireland through investment in that housing scheme. I do not think that the TaxPayers' Alliance has enough expertise in this area to be trusted as a source.

4.00 pm

Through investing in energy efficiency measures, we will not only create jobs but help address policies such as those to tackle fuel poverty. Investing in renewable energy production will help us increase our energy independence. Regardless of whether we believe that the subsidies required for green energy are acceptable, the fact is that oil and gas are running out. Dr Birol, chief economist at the International Energy Agency, stated that we hit peak oil in 2006. Therefore, the price of oil is only going to go up. We know how damaging that has been to our economy already and to people struggling to heat their homes, so we must do something to address that. Investing in renewable energy is a good way of doing that, as it meets a number of policy objectives.

Our poor public transport infrastructure has been pointed to by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board as a barrier to achieving our target to double tourism revenue by 2020. Given that 40,000 jobs are reliant on our tourism industry, there is no doubt that it is an important sector of our economy. Clearly, investment in sustainable transport will have economic, social and environmental benefits.

Those are some of the benefits of investment in a green economy, but I use the term investment advisedly, because investment is exactly what is needed and what is lacking in the current Budget. Perhaps it is the gap in taking the new green deal forward that is referred to in the motion. Without the financing required to back it up, a Programme for Government that states that it prioritises a green economy will never be realised. The business plan from the Green New Deal Coalition, which I mentioned, outlines how an investment of £72 million of government money will unlock a total investment of £253 million in energy efficiency measures that would see 100,000 homes improved over three years.

Mr Allister: With regard to that scheme for homes, has the Member also read that it has emerged that unless you can afford to pay for it, the loan system that has been put in place affords the repayment only to the degree of the energy savings, and that there is, therefore, a nil return for the household? Where, therefore, is the incentive for anyone to buy into it, except those who can afford it in the first place?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Agnew: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for the question. The scheme that is proposed is a pay as you save scheme. It is estimated that households will save £100 a year on energy bills after their loan repayments. So the householder will see savings immediately, while also seeing an improved quality of living in their house.

I said that investment is lacking. We have a budget that allocates a mere £4 million a year over three years for a scheme that requires £72 million. We need a joined-up approach at Executive level, and I do not believe that we are seeing that yet.

I welcome the fact that most in the House have spoken in favour of the motion, but given that 105 Members are represented at some level on the Executive, I am somewhat confused as to why the spirit that is being conveyed in the House does not seem to be reflected in the Budget. It is fair to say that my party opposed the Budget, and one of the main reasons for that was the lack of funding for the green new deal. It is interesting to see the same Members who supported that Budget say how great the green new deal and green economy will be, but they supported a Budget that does not provide the finance for it.

We need a holistic approach to deliver a green economy. A green economy is not a little corner of our economy; it is a radical way of looking at how our economy should look in the future. It is clear that that vision does not exist at Executive level. I see no better example of that than the spending of more than £500 million on a roads project that does not meet the outline of what the green economy should look like.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms M Anderson (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

Go raibh maith agat. Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the debate today. I thank those Members who brought the motion forward. I welcome the fact that we have had the opportunity to debate this important and relevant issue, and I have listened with great interest to the contributions that have been made.

An advance draft of the new Programme for Government is under consideration by Ministers with a view to bringing it forward to Executive colleagues in the near future, following which

we will begin an extensive consultation period internally and externally to government. I believe that I can say with absolute confidence that our new Programme for Government will deliver to prioritise the growing of a sustainable economy, tackling disadvantage and investing in the future. Those were themes that came out through the contributions today.

We need to see the promotion of a green economy as an opportunity. The world economy is changing fundamentally, with greater emphasis on resources and energy efficiency. The global low-carbon market is worth more than £3 trillion and is projected to reach £4 trillion by 2015 as economies around the world invest in low-carbon technologies across a broad range of sectors. That involves energy efficiencies running alongside the promotion of renewables. Businesses and organisations in the North that do and can recognise this opportunity for what it is will create wealth for all our people. Efficient homes can help to address and alleviate poverty, and businesses that harness the natural resources in our environment or utilise waste can create significant wealth for our community.

Members made a number of points, and I hope that I will get an opportunity to respond to them all. However, I want to pick up the point that Jimmy Spratt raised. We do recognise that there are costs associated with this, and we are very mindful of those. However, we believe that those costs will be outweighed by the benefits, which was also a point that Jimmy raised. Without doubt, this priority will not be without challenges. We are very much aware of that. Businesses will face challenges, and those will differ across sectors. Those challenges will include competitiveness issues, which may arise from additional costs and increased energy prices; challenges that may arise from the need to build climate change adaptations into future business planning; building and meeting consumer and business demand and expectation through greener products and services; and changing business models and production processes. The behaviour and influence of employees and consumers will also be an important factor in helping businesses become greener and more efficient.

The opportunities associated with enabling the transition to a greener economy are where our focus should lie. The transition towards a green economy can bring many advantages

when it comes to managing risk and increased resilience, such as those associated with the increasing and fluctuating fossil fuel prices and the impact of climate change. In that regard, I will respond to what Jim Allister said. Security of supply and protection from market fluctuation is essential.

Opportunities can be seized from new and emerging markets, nationally and internationally. Furthermore, businesses across the whole economy can save money through increasing energy and resource efficiency. In looking towards those opportunities, it is imperative to recognise the importance of collaboration and working across, and in many cases beyond, existing boundaries, whether those are administrative, legislative or political, to ensure cohesion of thought and action. I want to return to that in relation to OFMDFM's responsibility and the kind of collaborative work in which we are involved.

In our new Programme for Government we intend to focus on those imperatives. We have already shown our intention to embed sustainability in the operation and thinking of government with the recent publication of the new sustainable development implementation plan. Members should be encouraged by the express commitment given in the plan that we intend to run the development of future Programme for Government and sustainability plans in parallel.

Sustainability is a fundamental requirement in the progression towards greening the economy here. We are absolutely correct in building our plans around the rebuilding and rebalancing of the economy and we intend to do so by recognising the fact that a prosperous and thriving green economy will generate investment, innovation, skills and entrepreneurship to transform products and services, develop cleaner technologies and capture new markets. Almost 80,000 adults here have achieved qualifications in maths, English and ICT through the Department for Employment and Learning's essential skills strategy. That is a good foundation from which people can participate in and progress the green economy.

Clearly, the priority of sustainable economic growth must be underpinned by plans and actions. We are very much aware of that. We support innovation, target skills and encourage entrepreneurship. That comes down to one

thing: people. Our young people need to be supported to access high-quality education and achieve better educational outcomes. I hope that the announcement made in the Chamber today with regard to student fees will go some way in contributing to that.

Our workforce, currently and in the future, needs to be quick to participate in the twenty-first century world that is built upon a global economy and has technology at its heart. It is important to create conditions to encourage participation in the green agenda. That is why the draft Programme for Government seeks to interweave education, skills and training into the green economic tapestry.

That is no easy task, I admit, and my Executive colleagues are aware of that. However, it is vital to tackle problems strategically, systematically and collaboratively. We must seek to rebuild and rebalance our economy while simultaneously prioritising the creation of opportunities, tackling disadvantage, improving health and well-being, creating safer, stronger and shared communities and protecting our environment. We need to ensure that every penny of public money makes the maximum impact through the use of social clauses, which Willie Clarke and Mike Nesbitt spoke about, whereby expenditure is used as an opportunity to tackle disadvantage and create sustainable jobs. Both Members spoke about the importance of social clauses and entrepreneurship in Departments. OFMDFM openly acknowledged the importance of social clauses in the sustainable development implementation plan, which I encourage Members to take a look at. We have actions to grow the sector, including embedding social value clauses in public sector procurement processes. We encourage other Members to adopt the approach that OFMDFM and some other Departments are taking, and which we need to see across the board.

In many cases the green economy is seen as a subset of the economy at large. That is not our view at all. Our whole economy needs to be green. A green economy will maximise value and growth across its whole extent while it manages natural assets sustainably. Therefore, our Programme for Government must ensure that our economy can grow sustainably and for the long term. We must use our natural resources efficiently and develop resilience to market fluctuations and unforeseen events, and we

need to exploit comparative advantages where they exist.

During the last Programme for Government cycle, Invest NI undertook an awareness-raising programme to promote global business development opportunities in the field of renewable energy and energy efficiency. OFMDFM intends to undertake a strategic assessment of the opportunities to make greater use of national and international programmes associated with innovation and sustainability.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the junior Minister for giving way. I have listened carefully to what she has said and it seems good to me in its aspirations. However, in the Budget, the Executive has allocated £12 million in relation to the green new deal, as opposed to the green economy. Can the Minister assure the House that that figure will be looked at and revised upwards in order to provide adequate funding for the green new deal in retrofitting our homes to ensure maximum fuel and energy efficiency?

Ms M Anderson: I assure the Member that Ministers will do all that they can to address the opportunities that we have identified in the green new deal. Anna Lo spoke about the initiatives that are required from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), and we need to recognise DARD's work on previous and current rural development programmes, especially on biomass. DARD also intends to provide co-funding. I hope that that will address the previous Member's comment about the issue being very strategic and visionary, but it is actually about actions and what Departments and Ministers are doing.

4.15 pm

As I said, DARD intends to provide co-funding for industry-led, collaborative research projects to promote innovation in the rural community, and the Department of the Environment (DOE) is taking forward work under the waste infrastructure programme, which is expected to lead to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and to generate additional employment during the construction and operation of the new plants. That having been said, we also know that the planning process needs to be streamlined, which some Members mentioned, and quick decisions need to be made, particularly with regard to large-scale planning proposals.

I want to make specific reference to what Members said, particularly about work in OFMDFM. Forgive me if I cannot attribute any of these comments to one particular Member. Anna Lo and others talked about collaborative work to deliver outcomes, and Alban Maginness talked about the preparation and development of skills to match emerging economic opportunities. There was talk from other colleagues about innovation and the use of new and clean technologies as drivers for change, and we heard from Members about the opportunities associated with greening the economy. Each of those issues is under consideration in shaping the Programme for Government, and, equally important, in delivering it.

With reference to the sustainable development implementation plan, our focus is on the future. Our programme must be balanced, and there must be long-term thinking with actions to address the immediate and significant economic and social issues that we face. I want to highlight the work on OFMDFM's joined-up approach to the green economy. Over the past months, OFMDFM officials have been working as part of a green economic policy group with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department of Energy and Climate Change, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and with other devolved Administrations to provide input into a paper entitled 'Enabling the Transition to a Green Economy: Government and business working together', which sets out not just the vision for the green economy but the rationale for making that transition.

OFMDFM officials have been working with colleagues in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) to provide input into the draft economic strategy and to encourage the recognition of sustainability as an underpinning theme of economic growth. In fact, a ministerial subgroup meeting is taking place at the moment at which I should be in attendance, but my colleague Jonathan Bell is there representing the office. That is why he is not in the Chamber.

Without doubt, one of the most innovative projects has been Project Kelvin, which will result in an opportunity for a package of data to take 53 milliseconds to get from the North to America and will reduce the carbon footprint. We could have partnerships all over the world with

such a project. Indeed, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister are in America today marketing here as a place that is open and ready to do business.

Jimmy Spratt spoke about the Carbon Trust, which is supported by DETI with Invest NI's help. It helps companies on a strategic basis to reduce their carbon emissions and to increase the competitiveness of their business through lower energy bills. Overall, since 2002, it has helped local customers achieve around £200 million in direct cost savings and around £2.5 million —

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

Ms M Anderson: I could outline much more work that OFMDFM and other Departments are doing. I apologise to Members for not getting to their points. I want to take this opportunity to thank Members for this, my first time responding as junior Minister to a debate on such an important matter. If anyone wants to return to these issues with me or junior Minister Bell, they should feel free to do so.

Mr Lunn: I congratulate my party colleague on bringing this issue to the House. This is not the first time that we have debated the green economy or the green new deal, and I am sure that it will not be the last. I am particularly pleased about the level of agreement and co-operation between parties; it has been almost unanimous. I did not hear very much dissent at all. It is quite unusual for an Alliance motion not to be amended and to receive such agreement. That highlights the importance of the matter and the serious attitude that the House takes to it.

A lot of Members stressed the need for urgent action, and that remains the case. Like other Members, I encourage the junior Minister, in the words of the motion, to prioritise the green economy, in conjunction with all the other ministries involved. That principle or theme could apply to every ministry in the House, but it applies particularly to the ministries of Social Development, Finance and Personnel, and Agriculture and Rural Development. There are so many pluses involved — the only downside, frankly, is the need for finance — that it is difficult to know where to start.

The geography of Northern Ireland, to say nothing of the weather here, certainly puts us in an enviable position. We certainly have wind

and waves. Everything I read and hear about the green economy or the green new deal, call it what you will, indicates that — I will contradict Mr Allister on this point — targeted investment will produce an acceptable return. That has been proven over and over again. We are a long way behind the rest of the world on some of this. The models are there, and the appropriate action can be taken if we can find the money. If we reduce our dependence on fossil fuels by moving towards renewables, we will get a return, be it environmental or economic.

We have alternatives: wind, wave, solar, power from waste, and biomass. Mr Newton, who is not here now and probably had more to say in this debate than some of the others who spoke, challenged a point about generating power from waste. Let me make it absolutely clear: we support the generation of power from waste. There are plenty of models where it has been used on the continent and in the UK. I am glad that no other Lagan Valley MLAs are here, because they would probably slaughter me on the issue of the Glenavy incinerator. There is a question about where you put it. An area of special scientific interest and outstanding natural beauty on the shores of Lough Neagh is perhaps not the right place, but there are places, closer to industry and so on, where it could be located, and we should be looking at that.

We should look seriously at the issue of biomass. We all got an information pack, as usual, from the Assembly Research and Information Service. Yesterday, I got 'The Sunday Times', which is a very useful source of information. If all the biomass plants proposed for the UK, through whatever scheme is running there, come to fruition, there will be a need for 40 million tons of biomass. At the moment, only 10 million tons is produced in the UK. So what does that say? It says that they will not be making any more furniture there or that they will need to plant a lot more trees. My goodness, we have the facilities, the space and the climate here to grow trees such as willows and conifers, or whatever it takes. We have that opportunity as well as the one provided by the wind and waves here.

On the potential for job creation, again, I disagree with Mr Allister. It is there for all to see. If the green new deal project that has again been advocated in the Chamber, namely the insulation and retrofit of homes, were to go ahead, what sort of fillip would it give the construction industry? It jumps off the page that

that is what should be done. However, again, finance is needed. It would produce a gradual reduction in home heating costs and also reduce the pressure on people who can ill afford to pay for oil and coal. It might even reduce pressure on the health service.

With regard to agriculture, a move away from spreading noxious materials on the land, as is demanded by European directive, would have direct effect on the quality of waterways and the improvement of fish stocks. Following on from that would be better tourism potential. I could go on. There is always an upside; I do not hear many downsides. One might even be able to eat fresh wild salmon again instead of farmed stuff. That would be a step forward. Coarse fishing has stood up well to the amount of pollution that is involved; however, game fishing of trout and salmon has suffered badly over the years.

As a small country, Northern Ireland has a limited effect on global warming. However, it must do what it can on carbon emissions, waste recycling and reduction in the use of fossil fuels. Our waste management and recycling performance is improving — it needs to improve by 2020 to meet European targets. We may be on course.

We can draw on plenty of examples of good practice on all those matters; it has all been done before. With regard to recycling, I also noticed in 'The Sunday Times' that in Britain we seem to think that we are doing fairly well at present to recycle about half our aluminium cans. I am not sure whether Northern Ireland recycles half its cans, although the figure is probably similar. The figure for Norway is 93%; for Switzerland and Finland it is 88%. We are probably somewhere near the bottom of the league. There is so much that we can do.

I want to deal with some matters that Members raised. I will not go over what Anna Lo said because she made the case convincingly. In his contribution, Jimmy Spratt used a telling phrase that pensioners had to choose between heating and eating. He has got it in one: that is how bad it is for some people. He also referred to the potential to educate schoolchildren on those matters, although in some ways children are way ahead of us. They have better awareness than we do of their environment and the need to recycle and produce clean energy. However, we are the ones who must make decisions.

Willie Clarke mentioned the need for political will, and other Members came back to that issue. He also said that fossil fuels are not getting cheaper; I believe that the junior Minister made the same remark. One thing is sure: fossil fuels are not getting cheaper and will never again get cheaper. Anyone who thinks that they are not running out has their head in the sand. It is happening. It is supply and demand: as fossil fuels become scarcer, up will go the price. Furthermore, control of fossil fuels will not be in the realm of UK-controlled countries. The UK has little in the way of fossil fuels — at least, any that are obtainable. It will have to rely more and more on countries with which it may or may not have a good relationship.

Danny Kinahan talked about a seismic shift. I believe that he said that there is a need to plant about 10,000 trees. Ten million would be more like it. Northern Ireland has the space; we can do it. I believe that he was the first Member in the debate to mention planning and the need to fast-track planning for suitable schemes that involve the green economy. I could not agree more.

Alban Maginness talked about leading the charge and the need to integrate approaches to energy and the economy.

In his intervention to the Minister, he also mentioned the derisory figure of £12 million, which probably needs another nought put on it. I do not say that I know where the money will come from, but that is what is needed.

4.30 pm

Cathal Boylan mentioned planning restrictions, a joined-up approach and Departments acting together.

Mike Nesbitt — I am going to run out of time here, but not to worry — gave us a history lesson about manufacturing in Northern Ireland. He is absolutely correct: historically, we are a very innovative manufacturer. He managed to put in a good plug for the Ards peninsula, and he mentioned the possibility of unlocking EU funding with a green economy corridor.

I know that I have run out of time, so I thank everybody for their contribution, particularly the junior Minister —

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

Mr Lunn: She was reasonably positive about the whole thing. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to make the development of the green economy a priority within the next Programme for Government and to affirm that an overarching strategy for the development of the green economy should be implemented; and further calls on the Executive to bring together existing policies and initiatives, to identify gaps and to address them.

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

Railways: Londonderry Line

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

Mr McQuillan: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Regional Development to ensure the future of the Londonderry railway line, which links Coleraine with Londonderry and which connects the east and west of Northern Ireland.

I rise as a Member for East Londonderry. This issue arose over the summer months during recess, when it emerged that the Coleraine to Londonderry railway line was at risk of closure, as Translink announced that the number of daily journeys was to be reduced from nine to five, despite an increase in use. I should point out that any threat of closure has been denied by the Minister. However, if there is no investment in this vital transport connection over the next four years, the line will fall into a further state of disrepair and pose major safety concerns, meaning that its closure will surely be imminent as it will not be fit for purpose. I therefore welcome the opportunity to raise the issue in the House as a matter of major concern.

Over the years, we have seen the railways diminish. Railway connections were once central to the economic development of Ulster, securing transport links across our Province and ensuring easy access to our ports, allowing for the import and export of goods across the British Isles and the world. There is therefore merit in securing the future of this line, which links Londonderry to Coleraine, Antrim and Belfast. The Coleraine to Londonderry line provides a service for the people of this Province who are travelling from the Maiden City — now the UK City of Culture 2013 — to Belfast or further afield. Londonderry, being the closest city within reach of my constituency, provides a vital connection for my constituents for shopping or working. The line also provides an important link for students attending any of the three University of Ulster campuses — Magee, Coleraine and Jordanstown — and for tourists visiting the

north-west region. It therefore seems illogical to see the service cut and at risk of closure at a time when fuel prices are soaring and more people are being forced from their car to public transport. That has been a long-term aim of government in order to reduce congestion on our roads and cut greenhouse gases.

In any society, it is normal to increase supply when there is an increase in demand, rather than the other way around. In 2007, the then Minister for Regional Development announced an upgrade for the Coleraine to Londonderry line, which included laying a whole new line of track. That was after significant pressure was placed on him by local railway campaigners. Work was scheduled to start this year and would have resulted in shorter journey times and more, not fewer, trains. The current Minister has stated that work on the line will not happen this year and instead will happen in 2014 and that there will be a £55 million cut in the funding. Also, the 2010 comprehensive spending review (CSR) reduced the money available to our Government. It is somewhat ironic that the Minister responsible for that decision comes from a party that advocated cuts during the 2010 general election campaign under the Tory banner. People remembered that in the recent election to this House in May, and the party was punished at the polls as a result.

The north-west is being wrongly targeted and discriminated against by the Minister's party. I back that statement up with yet another example. When the previous Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey, decided not to proceed —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr McQuillan: No, I am carrying on.

He decided not to proceed with the new radiotherapy unit in Altnagelvin. That decision was overturned by my party colleague Edwin Poots within weeks of his being appointed to the health post.

In 2009, a report was compiled by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC) to consider the possible long-term social, physical and economic developments that could be achieved through the enhancement of the northern corridor railway in the north-west. It demonstrated that passenger numbers had increased by over one third since 2001-02 and the largest increase in the entire network was on the Londonderry

railway line. It was identified that the Londonderry line was key for tourism in the north-west region.

As jobs are difficult to come by, people are now expected to travel outside their own area to secure work. That means travelling to one of the two major cities in Northern Ireland where jobs are in better supply. Given that my constituency falls between the two cities, maintaining that railway line and securing investment means a great deal to my constituents and to me as an elected representative. The PWC report pointed that out, arguing that investment in the line would increase labour mobility and improve access to tourist destinations, thus facilitating growth in that sector.

Savings and financial benefits were also identified by the report. By securing this investment, estimated at £2.5 million per annum, the Department for Regional Development (DRD) has a role to play in rejuvenating and strengthening our economy. It is, therefore, disappointing that the investment has been cut, which effectively risks closing the line down in the medium to long term. Given that the Minister does not envisage the scheme happening before 2014, to be completed by 2015-16, tourists and residents of Northern Ireland will not benefit from the upgrade in time for 2013, when Londonderry is the British capital of culture and an influx of tourists and visitors is expected.

I commend the motion to the House and look forward to the debate and the Minister's response, which will hopefully be positive. I look for a response that is not a fudge but action and an announcement that the work will begin this year, not in 2014.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt i dtacaíocht an rúin. Tá sé an-tábhachtach go rachaidh an obair ar an líne ó Chúl Raithin go Doire ar aghaidh. Ach tá díomá orainn nach bhfuil an tAire ábalta a rá go bhfuil an t-airgead aige ag an bhomaite.

I want to say that — *[Interruption.]* Do you want to say something? Do you have something to say?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney: Somebody speaking from a sedentary position had something to say.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask all Members to make all remarks through the Chair. Continue.

Mr McCartney: I am just asking, through the Chair, whether the Member wants to make a statement.

Sinn Féin will be supporting the motion. It is a welcome motion on an important issue. It is an issue that is particularly important to the people of Derry. I welcome the Minister's recent statements and, indeed, his commitment to the line, but what we need to see now is delivery on that commitment. I think that, on his recent visit to Derry, the Minister got a sense of the feeling right across the political spectrum and from civic and business leadership of the need to progress the work that has already been carried out on the much-needed upgrading of the line from Coleraine to Derry and, obviously, the linkage between Derry and Belfast and beyond.

Until recently — indeed, up until Conor Murphy became the Minister for Regional Development — the Derry view was that there were always questions around the future of the line. An options paper was put to the Executive in 2001. I am sure that we all sometimes have memory lapses, and I know that some Members here have recently accepted that they have memory lapses. They will find that an options paper was put to the Executive, and that is where the terminology around “lesser-used line” and “more-used line” and that type of confusion crept in. However, when Conor Murphy went into office, he removed that uncertainty. He lifted the restriction on the investment, and the sense that the Derry line was lesser used was put to bed. It is not a lesser-used line; it is a core service to Derry and Belfast and beyond.

Conor Murphy also made the commitment. He visited Derry, as the current Minister did, and listened to the views of the city. He heard from right across the spectrum about issues that the people of Derry feel need to be tackled to ensure that regional disparity and the inequalities of the past are brought to an end and to service the regeneration that would allow the economy of Derry and the north-west to grow. At the heart of that were the road infrastructure and the airport but also the railway, and the Minister will be well aware of that.

The big concern now is that, despite some cutbacks in the Department's budget, there was an overstating of the funding required to complete the work, and the Minister heard that at first hand in Derry. We need to send a clear signal that the original proposal is still

there and still necessary. Progress against the commitment to tackle regional disparity, which the Executive made in the previous mandate and which the current Executive continue to make, will be clearly seen in how we advance the project to enhance the Derry to Coleraine railway line.

At the meeting in the Guildhall in Derry, the Minister heard that people are supportive and will be supportive of any attempts that he makes. People can make special cases, and we can continue to make special cases, which is fine. However, we do not want a special case to be made for this project, and that was alluded to in the Guildhall by Gregory Campbell. In this instance, the funding was in place and is still in place. The project must be carried out in such a way that the line is completed. The Minister would have heard that when he came to Derry, and, in fairness, his officials made a counter-argument about the need to complete it in 2013. We all know that the City of Culture is coming to Derry in 2013. We all know that there is massive tourist potential as a result and that the line must be working at its maximum.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr McCartney: The number of passengers using the line will be boosted as a result of the City of Culture coming to Derry in 2013. The tourism legacy of 2013 will be boosted by the Minister delivering the Derry to Coleraine line.

Mr Beggs: I support the motion, as, I believe, most people in Northern Ireland will. I greatly value our rail infrastructure, and I think that it will become increasingly important in the future. Energy prices are rising, and, with many believing that we have already reached peak oil production, those prices can only increase further. In addition, the increasing pressure to reduce our CO2 emissions makes it likely that increasing taxation will fall in that area. It is important that we retain our rail network because of the efficiencies that it can deliver.

There are many similarities between the Coleraine to Londonderry railway line and the Whitehead to Larne railway line in my constituency. Mr McCartney referred to lesser-used lines earlier: both lines fall into that category, and both are threatened with a potential reduction in services through the timetabling that is planned. Both also serve universities, with the Whitehead to Larne line

serving the University of Ulster at Jordanstown. It also links Larne to Newtownabbey, and it is the only easy way to get between those two places via public transport. Therefore, both are important routes. This is not an east versus west issue, as some may be attempting to play it, and there are issues in my constituency in the very east of the Province involving the railway line that cause me concern. I hope that funding will be made available by the Executive and the Department to protect the services.

As to how money is being spent, we must return to the Budget. Mention was made earlier about where difficulties arose, and we must remember that the Assembly and the Executive made decisions in the Budget in March. They decided where they were going to prioritise the money that was given to us, and, when potentially up to £850 million is dedicated to the A5, guess what happens? Money is not available for other options. I ask Sinn Féin, the DUP and the Alliance Party, all of whom supported the Budget, which committed huge sums to a project that still does not even have planning permission, how they can justify that. Even at this stage, would it not be better to rethink that project so that the A5 can be upgraded and other important routes and the railway lines can also be improved?

4.45 pm

Mr Allister: I understand the point that the Member is making about others' embarrassment about what they have supported. However, will the Member now support his Minister and urge him to find the £75 million that is needed for the Coleraine-Londonderry route by reducing the lavish scale of the A5 and spend that money there, where it would be a better spend? Will he encourage the Minister to make that practical solution to the problem of the Coleraine-Londonderry line?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Beggs: That is an option, of course. I represent East Antrim, and I can ask only that that money be used to improve the A2 bottleneck. The Minister told us that that money was delayed to enable the A5 to be completed. Therefore, representing East Antrim, I ask for it to be given priority in the funding. If any money is available thereafter, I would have no difficulty with it being used to upgrade the railway line.

Of course, as we speak, that route has not even got planning permission.

It is important that people understand that, when they chose to prioritise that Budget, they also chose not to put the money into a budget line to upgrade this railway. Indeed, if they look carefully at the draft Budget statement that was issued by the Department, they will see clearly that no money was available in it until a very late point in the Budget period, when some £20 million would become available. The £75 million needed was not included and would be available only in the latter part. Why did others decide not to prioritise the railway? Will they rethink that now? That is the challenge, that is the realpolitik, and there is no point simply pretending that it is not an issue.

The statements made in the press by the previous Minister should also be clarified. There is a lot of confusion about the issue. On 1 September, the previous Minister was quoted as saying that Danny Kennedy was being disingenuous by saying that he had not got the money to finish the project. Is the money to finish the project in the Budget, or is it not? Has the money been earmarked for real investment? On 5 September, the 'Belfast Telegraph' said:

"Last week former Transport Minister Conor Murphy said he saw no reason why the work could not proceed. He also confirmed that he had budgeted for the full project during his term in office."

When the Minister took over the budget that was handed to him, was there money in it for this railway, or are people doing some late rethinking, having committed too much money to certain projects? Are some people getting cold feet?

It is important that we invest in our capital infrastructure carefully, strategically and wisely. I fear that that has not been the case to date.

Mr Dallat: I thank those who tabled the motion. When I heard the news last July that the number of trains between Coleraine and Derry would be reduced from nine to five, I felt a mixture of anger and disbelief. There was a fear that we would become the laughing stock of Europe at a time when, in every other country, new lines are being laid and old ones are being reopened. This is the railway line, of course, that Michael Palin described as the most beautiful railway journey in the world. The proposal is to reduce speed limits on it right down to 5 mph on at least one stretch. People fear that this

is the end. They feel angry, let down, betrayed, deceived and, yes, that they have been lied to.

The railway is, of course, not simply about trains and tourist potential; it is about people and the whole economic and social development of the north-west. The people know that; they are not stupid. They know that this is a direct blow at people who, for many years, have struggled to build their economy, social infrastructure and communications to link railways and roads with the population. That is the way forward, and it is the way that it has been done in other places.

Quite honestly, I do not think that the Assembly has the luxury of sparring across the debating table or engaging in disputes. We need to pull collectively in the same direction, because our responsibilities go well beyond those of Translink. Translink is there for the economic delivery, but we have a political responsibility to deliver the aspirations and principles of the Good Friday Agreement, which promised faithfully to the people across this land territory that we would deliver it and deliver it equally.

I am not a violent person, but the decision was a slap in the face. It was a clear indication that people, including elected representatives, were not listened to. Such people include, for example, the Northern Corridor Railways Group, which spent thousands of pounds and addressed this Assembly and the Dáil. Yes, the railway runs beyond Belfast — it runs to Drogheda, Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Galway. It is part of the rail network of this island as it existed before partition. I sometimes do not agree with the Into the West lobby group, but it again has been let down by what has happened.

I support steps to reverse the madcap idea of substituting buses for trains on what should be our intercity train service between our two principal cities. Where else in the world would this happen? We have a choice. We can take this on the chin and forget about the railways and the ambitious plans for the future that I and many others, including Adrian McQuillan, have been involved in for many years. We can give in to Translink, which dangles a 15-minute substitute bus service in the hope that the people of the north-west might give up on the railways. However, they have not, because they were told by direct rule Ministers and others that, if they wanted a railway, they should use it. By God, they have used it. More people are travelling now on the Belfast to Derry railway line

than use the Belfast to Dublin line, for example. You see, however, that those who gave us that advice have been caught.

In two years' time, as has been mentioned, the Maiden City will be the City of Culture. What a wonderful opportunity to portray that city to the world, including all the talent, culture, music, language and everything else, yet we are substituting buses for the railways. I ask you, Mr Deputy Speaker. If some other city had the opportunity to be City of Culture, millions of pounds would be poured into the infrastructure to ensure that that city had the best opportunity to showcase itself.

I ask you on bended knee — I am not the first one to use that term — to please rise above the petty politics, rise above the wee rows —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Dallat: Yes, I will do that; do not worry. Please, let us put the money back in place and honour the commitments of the past.

Mr Dickson: From the outset, I declare my support and that of the Alliance Party for the motion. I commend the Members who have a can-do attitude to the proposal, and I regret that there are those who seem to have a cannot-do attitude to it. It was disappointing to hear that funding for the upgrade of the Coleraine to Londonderry line is to be deferred. As one who has seen the A2 road project in my constituency deferred once again in the Department's budget, I assure representatives from the north-west that I share their disappointment and frustration.

The railway line from Coleraine to Derry is a vital infrastructural asset. The line has seen the largest growth rate in passenger numbers, but I am not sure whether Mr Dallat is correct in comparing it with the Belfast to Dublin line in the past decade. Its development has been described as providing significant scope for further growth of the north-west region. The upgrade of the line would allow for a reduction in journey times from Belfast by some 30 minutes and would enable trains to reach Derry by 9.00 am, enabling people to expand their opportunities for employment in that city. As with other public transport infrastructure, it plays an important role in building a Northern Ireland based on fairness and equality. Not everyone has access to a car, and even those

who have access to cars know the price of fuel and need to spare the environment by travelling on trains. The upgrade of that line will allow people greater access to the labour market, public services and friends and family, regardless of their economic status or background. Furthermore, as has been consistently noted in the tourism literature and, indeed, remarked on by Members today, the Coleraine to Derry line is one of the most beautiful train journeys in the world. It is a real shame that significantly fewer passengers will enjoy the stunning views that it provides, especially during the City of Culture year, when numbers visiting the city will undoubtedly increase.

The students who, as Mr Beggs said, benefit from the line in east Antrim will not be able to benefit from the line between Coleraine and Derry, two places where universities flourish, or when travelling from places further away, such as Belfast. Despite the Minister's reassurance that bus services will be provided, one can really understand that travelling with luggage and suitcases, as many have to do, is a lot better experienced on a train than it ever will be on a bus. The Minister said that he is committed to the line and has no plans to close it, and I welcome that. However, some of those things may be beyond your control, Minister. Indeed, Translink engineers warned earlier this year that a failure to invest in the line over the next four years would simply lead to its closure.

Although I welcome the allocation of funding for engineering work to improve safety and keep the line operational, that is not a sign of enthusiasm or commitment. Even if the full funding of the project does not proceed urgently, significant investment in the interim — for example, on the passing loops — would at least signal the Department's genuine dedication to the line. The Department has reneged on its promises before, and, without such urgent investment, there is no doubt that the railway bosses will wonder whether that is going to happen again. In those circumstances, it would not surprise me if Translink put the future of the line between Coleraine and Londonderry under consideration. I call on the Minister to consider at least investing more in the interim on passing loops and other upgrades to prevent such a situation.

Finally, I want to highlight the wider implications of the Department's policy on the Coleraine to Derry line. The failure to fund that project points to the Department's contravention of its

own regional development strategy, outlined in January of this year, in which it stated that the Department for Regional Development (DRD) is committed to:

“Adapt the existing transport network to facilitate the modal shift away from the car.”

We all know about emissions from cars and the pollution that they cause on our roads and in our atmosphere. Clearly we have a disproportionate problem in Northern Ireland. The failure to fund the upgrade of the Coleraine to Derry line shows a lack of commitment to tackling that problem. That failure is further emphasised by the disproportionate allocation of funding for road building, which is exacerbating, rather than ameliorating —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Dickson: Finally, I assure the House of the Alliance Party's support for the proposal.

Mr Spratt (The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion as the Chair of the Regional Development Committee, as it is a subject that was debated in Committee during the previous session and will come before the Committee again on Wednesday. Members will also be aware that there has been substantial press coverage of the subject over the summer recess. I advise the House that I met the Minister and, separately, the chief executive of the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company in August to discuss the matter.

The Committee has expressed its concerns to the Minister and his Department regarding the decision to suspend the upgrading of that important link. We accept that these are challenging times from a financial perspective and that there are competing priorities. However, in these difficult times, the focus must be on rebuilding and recovering our economy and on generating income and investment in Northern Ireland plc. How significant, then, is that stretch of railway — those 30-odd miles of track? How and in what way can it be expected to make a contribution to reviving our economy?

5.00 pm

Its impact is very significant, and the consequences of not committing to the upgrade should not and cannot be contemplated. Londonderry is the UK City of Culture in 2013.

In their bid for that designation, the bid team stressed that being awarded City of Culture status was not just of significance to the north-west as a region but to the entirety of Northern Ireland. In their bid, they stated that they sought:

“to win designation...as the City of History, the Child Friendly City, the Digital City, and the Connected City.”

They were confident, as a connected city, that they could, for example, achieve almost 300,000 extra visitor nights. The upgrading of the railway line was seen as being of great significance, as it would allow for increased journey frequencies and speeds, allowing the city to exploit the tourism potential in the region and farther afield.

Although I accept that Liverpool was a European City of Culture, I still find it interesting to look at some of the outputs achieved as a result of that designation, as I believe that it highlights the potential of Londonderry as a City of Culture for the economy of Northern Ireland. In the year that Liverpool was designated, it realised an economic impact of £750 million. What if Londonderry achieved a tenth of that? That would put £75 million into our economy. Liverpool recorded increases of 30% to 35% in tourist visitors. What impact would a similar increase mean to Londonderry and Northern Ireland as a whole?

One of the key factors in those achievements was, however, an appropriate infrastructure. Undoubtedly, good rail networks were a vital component of that. I fear that postponing the upgrade of the track will have a negative impact on the 2013 celebrations. How many tourists will be attracted to travel by rail from Belfast or farther afield, knowing that, at Coleraine, just 30 miles from the centre of Londonderry, the train will stop and their luggage will be hauled onto a bus in order to complete the journey? What sort of message does that send out?

There are other considerations that need to be taken into account, such as the impact on those who commute to work in Londonderry or elsewhere. What about the students who travel to the University of Ulster campus or our citizens who make journeys to hospital services in Belfast? What impact will the postponement have on planning their appointments or classes?

The Londonderry Chamber of Commerce publicly stated that it would write to me, as

Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, to ask that the Committee investigate the departmental budget in order to gauge where the money that is alleged to have been allocated to the upgrade has gone. I confirm that I have received that letter and that the matter will be discussed by the Committee at its meeting on Wednesday. It would not, therefore, be appropriate for me to comment on the budget allocations or give other views on that correspondence until it has been discussed formally by the Committee and an agreed position is reached.

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

Mr Spratt: I am content that the views expressed at the Committee on this matter are sympathetic with the motion.

Mr Ó hOisín: Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá i bhfabhar an rúin, agus ba mhaith liom mo thacaíocht a thabhairt dó. The nineteenth century marked a high point in civil engineering in this country. Indeed, at that time, a person could have travelled from Coleraine to Cobh and from Roundstone to Ranelagh and, according to recent reports, probably quicker than we could today. By the 1890s, it was possible to get to virtually every market town in the country. I think of my home village, which at that time had a population of only 700, a quarter of the figure now, and which was served for 65 years by a branch line.

I have travelled widely in Europe, where the option for rail travel is still very much in place despite two world wars and many other conflicts that destroyed its infrastructure. That option is not available to us. What are the reasons behind that? Of course, the roads have been improved, although we are not so sure about that in the west. Freight haulage was taken off the trains some time in the 1960s. Every Thursday morning when I come to this place, I sit behind a queue of lorries that are coming up the M2, heading for Larne and biding their time. All our transport now goes by road, and quite a percentage of it comes through Dungiven.

In the 1950s and 1960s passenger numbers fell. However, according to figures given in reply to a question asked by Mr Campbell, the Member for East Derry, on 21 May 2010, in 2009-10 276,157 passengers travelled on all or part of the Coleraine-Derry line; an increase of 75% over the previous five years. That figure did

not include passengers using travel cards and school passes.

The report commissioned by the Northern Corridor Railways Group made a number of proposals, including a fast and reliable intercity service between Belfast and Derry. Were I to commute to this place, to be here for 8.50 am, I would have to leave Derry station at 6.30 am. That is not acceptable. Were I to commute to Derry from Coleraine, I could not get in before 9.00 am. It is as simple as that. That is not acceptable. The report also called for an enhanced commuter service to Derry from Coleraine and for the area along the Coleraine-Derry corridor; a fast and reliable inter-urban route between Derry and Coleraine; and a fast and reliable inter-urban route between Coleraine and Belfast. Those are the improvements required on the Coleraine-Derry line.

On the last day of summer, I travelled on a family pass with my nine-year-old. Although it represented good value, the contrast between the Coleraine-Portrush section and the Coleraine-Derry section was remarkable indeed.

In 2001, the consolidation option, which identified core and lesser-used lines, was put to the Assembly. In 2007, Minister Conor Murphy removed the distinction. The business case for upgrading the line identified a cost of £75 million to £80 million, with work to start in 2011-12. Between 2001 and 2003 — I wonder how much this represents previous Ministers' commitment to the Derry-Coleraine line — only £1.5 million was spent on essential repairs, and some of that was forced in areas such as Downhill because of accidents and near misses.

The Northern Corridor Railways Group's development study identified other low-cost but medium-high impact proposals, including park and ride; integrating ticketing and timetables; the tourism and education sector; and cross-border linkages. In addition, the Peace Bridge in Derry has opened the city side to the train, and I believe that there are benefits to be had from that. We are also missing out many things along that stretch of line. The track passes Lisahally harbour; you could literally spit into the harbour compound. The train goes through City of Derry Airport; indeed, planes sometimes have to stop for it. It goes by the Ballykelly/Shackleton base, which is under review for an economic appraisal.

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

Mr Ó hOisín: It goes through places such as Benone, Downhill, Castlerock, where there are tourist attractions such as steam trains and various designated areas of outstanding natural beauty.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Mr Nesbitt: In the previous debate, I highlighted the advantages of my constituency of Strangford as a worthy beneficiary of any developments in the green economy. On this occasion, let me start by saying that, as far as I am aware, there is not a single millimetre of working rail line in Strangford. I now have the full attention of the Minister, who is wondering where I am taking this. My interest is in the context of the debate.

Of course, the railway network is part of our industrial infrastructure. If you ask any of those charged with promoting inward investment and growing the private sector, be it Invest Northern Ireland from the public sector or PwC or KPMG from the private sector, they will tell you that infrastructure is one of the keys. They will tell you that our education system is a big positive and is very attractive to foreign direct investment. However, when it comes to our infrastructure, we have a mixed bag. Project Kelvin, which we heard about earlier, is a major positive, but our road and rail network is more of an inhibitor to industrial growth.

Like anything else that we debate in the House, the motion is good in isolation. However, there is a broader context. If we are to promote, support and fund the development, we will have to find a pot of money, which means taking the money out of another pot to put it into the development of the railways. The regional development pot faces peculiar circumstances. A huge percentage is devoted to one project; as it happens, to one road. Following the recent announcement about student fees, a percentage of what is left, as I understand it, is to be top-sliced to fund that initiative. Once again, money from one pot is being taken to fund a development in another.

Her Majesty's Treasury's latest national infrastructure plan identifies:

"The OECD found that, between 1970 and 2005, investment in UK roads, rail and electricity generating capacity had a stronger positive effect on the level of GDP per capita, and on short term growth, than other types of capital investment.

Failing to make the right choices risks slower economic growth and ultimately puts the UK's international competitiveness in jeopardy."

Are we making the right choices? Would I like to see a renewed rail link between Coleraine and Londonderry? Of course I would. Would I like to see a better road link between Belfast and Derry? Of course I would. For that, however, you must take money out of one pot and put it into another. You cannot look at the proposition in isolation.

During the debate, many Members have made reference to the City of Culture in 2013. Why are we highlighting our infrastructure needs only today?

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Member for giving way. It is very clear from the bid for the UK City of Culture, which included an Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) presentation, that the railway line would be modernised and up and running for 2013. It is not that the infrastructural problems have arisen now. The work was planned for, and the Executive indicated that the money was there. It is not about creating a problem now; it is about trying to solve it.

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

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his intervention, but I return to the question of where it is in the Budget. Is the money available for the initiative or not? It seems that a huge percentage of the DRD budget — a percentage that is disproportionate and out of kilter with priorities of any other Department — has been reserved and ring-fenced to promote one single project.

The previous Executive seemed quite proud of their four-year budget and the fact that this is the only region of the United Kingdom that has such long-range certainty in respect of its spend. However, I suggest to the House that that is but a blink of an eye when it comes to infrastructure planning. The populist act would be to support the motion, the responsible act would be to ask how it fits into the big picture, and the brave act for the House and the Executive would be to revisit the plans.

Mr Byrne: I support the motion. As the SDLP's spokesperson on regional development, I am very happy to add to the debate on the nature of the strategic route. Essentially, we are talking

about refitting 30 miles of railway track. The line is a strategic route between our two main cities, Belfast and Derry. We must enhance it, not put it in jeopardy. I recognise that it is about the funding that the Minister has. However, we should not add to the uncertainty about the track.

5.15 pm

We have only a small rail network in Northern Ireland, and we need to expand it rather than propose to reduce it. We have only the Belfast-Larne, Belfast-Bangor, Belfast-Dublin and Belfast-Derry lines. The railway should be part of our tourism infrastructure. Earlier, someone referred to Mr Palin, the journalist who talked about his experience of that great northern route. It is crucial to have a viable, modern, inter-city rail network service, and, given that they are our two main cities, we have to improve the track and the travel times between Derry and Belfast.

As other Members have stated, Derry or Londonderry is to be the UK City of Culture in 2013. That offers a big promotional opportunity for the north-west and Derry in particular. We do not want to jeopardise that. For over 10 years, the DRD has wanted to promote a shift in transport from road-based vehicles to public transport and to rail in particular. In the past 10 years, the Department has been largely successful in improving investment in the rail network. One of the good aspects is that there are modern train sets on the lines, and that is a tribute to the advances that have been made in the past 10 years. Travel journey figures from Derry to Coleraine are not great, but they are much better than they were 10 years ago. A better rail service with a better timetable will lead to a big increase in passenger figures in the future.

More and more tourists will travel by rail in the future, and students have an inter-city rail experience in Europe. We can also have that experience in Ireland. Because of events to do with the 2013 City of Culture, timing is of the essence. I hope that, in some way, the Minister and the Department can reschedule spending on capital works projects and programmes to try to facilitate that better rail service.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Members from East Derry for bringing the motion to the Floor of the House on what is a hugely important issue. It is becoming an unacceptable routine for Members from west of the Bann, particularly from the north-west, to secure debates to implore the

Assembly to reverse detrimental decisions when it is apparent that Members from a great many constituencies in Northern Ireland do not have to do that. If we are to bring an acceptable level of self-governance to the people, we must ensure that it is equitable and absolutely fair. I for one did not come to the House to apologise to my constituents when Departments take decisions that do not take into account the needs of the people in my area. I came here to make positive changes for the people of Derry and for all the people of Northern Ireland. We should all be working together for all of its people. After all, the issue is not about east of the Bann.

I am grateful to the Minister, who, over the holiday period, attended a meeting in the Guildhall. He will readily accept that that was a very constructive, informed and hugely important meeting. Every aspect of the people of the city was represented, including the social partners; the business community as represented by the president of Londonderry Chamber of Commerce; the Into the West campaign delegates; and all elected leaders. They came forward strongly with the right rationale, whether that is economic, social or environmental.

I resent some of the comments of the Ulster Unionist Member who spoke previously. As Eamonn McCann said at the debate at the Guildhall, we are the second city and we are not second-class citizens. At times, that is how the people of the city feel, whether it is on the cancer debate that was important to Derry or on the debate on the railway. This issue did not start last year, or in July when John Dallat referred to it. It started decades ago when the people of the city and across the region started the Northern Corridor Railways Group and the Into the West campaign. I resent the question "Why now?", because it is not an issue that has come up now but decades ago.

I made the point to the Minister in the chamber in Derry that, in the 1970s and 1980s when money was allocated for infrastructure in Northern Ireland, it was based on car ownership. That was the priority in Northern Ireland. So, what chance did areas with high unemployment or high deprivation levels have? They had absolutely no chance. So, we are catching up —

Mr Nesbitt: I appreciate the Member giving way. Does he accept that, when I spoke, I said that,

in isolation, of course I accepted the proposal? I simply sought that it be considered in context.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr P Ramsey: I accept that. If that is an apology for comments that I may have misinterpreted, I accept that.

In going forward, the rail link is, naturally, a great concern for all of us in the Foyle and East Derry constituencies. We have been promised that work and, as Raymond McCartney said earlier, we are sick, sore and tired of hearing that it is one of the lesser-used railway lines. That was thrown in our face. It was never marketed, and I say to Translink and to the Minister that it is still not marketed properly. However, over the past number of years, we have seen a serious increase in the number of passengers and, as John Dallat said, more passengers now go from Derry to Belfast than from Dublin to Belfast. So, in recognition of that, it is important that we are not doing a piecemeal exercise.

When I made the intervention during the Ulster Unionist Member's speech, I made the point that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as part of the business case for the UK City of Culture bid, made it absolutely clear that the rationale was that we would have in place the infrastructure needed. Why did it say that? To maximise the importance of the UK City of Culture, but not just to Derry. People across Northern Ireland will benefit hugely from the UK City of Culture bid, because some events would never come to Northern Ireland if not for that bid. Everybody gets very passionate about the debate because we are catching up, but we always seem to be on the back foot. We are on the back foot today again when the Minister for Employment and Learning, for the first time, is conceding in the new mandate that plans have been abandoned to allow the maximum student number (MaSN) at Magee to expand to 1,000 students. He said that that is going out as well.

So, on behalf of all the people in that city, I say to the Minister directly: I asked you during that meeting whether you will go to the Executive and make a special case for funding for this project because, if you do not, we will fail the people of Northern Ireland and fail the efforts of so many people to bring the UK City of Culture to Derry. However, it is not just about the UK City of Culture. I was in the Chamber and heard Jimmy Spratt talking. We have 350 students

from Coleraine who regularly come to the Magee campus to study. I do not know how many go the other way. Those students will now have to come off and on to get to Derry or will have to use the bus, which does not suit them.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr P Ramsey: At least they can study on the train, and I appeal to the House to support the motion.

Mr Agnew: I welcome the motion, but I need to be clear from the outset that I do not think that survival of the line is sufficient: a full upgrade of the line is required.

As Roy Beggs said in his speech, it is not an east versus west issue. I represent North Down, which is very much to the east of the region. To me, it is a roads versus sustainable transport issue. We have just finished a debate on the green economy in which I questioned the actual commitment to the green economy. Although there were many fine words in the House about the benefits of investment in the green economy and in sustainability, the money has not followed. This motion highlights the lack of investment, particularly in sustainable transport, of which there are many benefits. There are economic benefits. The Derry UK City of Culture bid has been raised, and it is a perfect example to highlight the problem that Derry, which is our second city, does not have an efficient sustainable link to Belfast. Travel times on the Belfast to Derry railway have increased rather than decreased over the years due to the level of disrepair on the line.

As a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I listened to representatives of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board talk about how they wanted to double tourism revenue in Northern Ireland by 2020. They described our poor public transport infrastructure as one of the major barriers to that. When a body that represents around 40,000 jobs in Northern Ireland states that we have a problem, we should listen.

There are obvious social benefits to investing in rail and in this line. Northern Ireland is one of the most car dependent regions in Europe. The price of oil, and therefore petrol, continually increases. As was said in the previous debate, we have probably surpassed peak oil supplies, so that price will only keep going up. We need to

find alternatives because private car ownership is becoming increasingly unaffordable for many families.

There are obvious environmental benefits in investing in this railway line. It is estimated that the full upgrade would save 20,000 tons of carbon every year. Therefore, we are meeting environmental as well as economic and social targets through this investment. This is exactly the type of investment that, when times are tight, we should be looking at — investment that is good for the economy, for people and the environment.

Rail passenger numbers are going up and nowhere more so than on that line. Since 2008, passenger numbers have increased by 122%. The increase in passenger numbers is there but the investment trend is in the opposite direction. Spending on public transport as an overall percentage of our transport spend is going down. It is currently less than 20% of the overall transport budget, largely because of the hundreds of millions of pounds going into one road project that does not meet the sustainability criteria, which I outlined in this debate and the whole House seemed to agree about in the previous debate.

I support the motion. I call on the Minister and the Executive to find the £75 million needed to upgrade the line. Perhaps they will look at their other priorities and decide that, given where we are and what we need to achieve in sustainability, those other projects are not as big a priority after all.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Members who tabled the motion and all Members who have spoken in favour of upgrading the railway line. I am also grateful for the opportunity to voice support for the upgrading of the line.

It is nothing short of scandalous that the much needed restoration of the Coleraine-Londonderry railway line has been postponed until 2014. Although I welcome the Minister's commitment to maintain and eventually upgrade that stretch of railway, we need his solid assurances that the money will be secured to start and finish the long promised critical upgrade for the line.

Public sector cuts are today's harsh reality, but the lesson should surely have been learned that we cannot rebuild our economy by dismantling the Province's infrastructure. The Londonderry to Belfast line is the artery of Northern Ireland's

economic heart. It provides a vital economic connection between Northern Ireland's two main cities. It is an essential element of the tourism project of the north coast. It provides cost effective, efficient transport into Londonderry for local commuters.

5.30 pm

Many, many people will be affected if the railway is forced out of service because it does not get the upgrade it so badly needs. I put it to the Minister that it is simply not acceptable to "work towards securing money" for the essential upgrade of this significantly important line. He needs to ensure that the money is secured.

I am also concerned that the Minister claims to have secured £20 million to begin refurbishment of the line in 2014. Although it is reassuring that some money has already been set aside, it falls far short of the £75 million required to finish the project. I urge the Minister and his Department to prioritise the upgrade of the Coleraine to Londonderry railway line and to put it into their future budget strategy to guarantee that the remaining £55 million is secured to finish what has been started. The case for the immediate upgrading of the Coleraine to Londonderry railway line is compelling, and I urge the Minister to find the necessary funding. I support the motion.

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): I am grateful to the Members who tabled the motion and to those who have contributed to the debate. It gives me an opportunity to outline the events surrounding the issue, to deal with some of the issues that have been raised by Members, to outline the plans to upgrade the Londonderry to Coleraine line and to explain why the full relay project has yet to start.

I start by dispelling the notion that there is any plot on my part or on behalf of my political party, the Ulster Unionist Party, to close the Londonderry to Coleraine line. I want to make it absolutely clear, as I did recently in Londonderry, that that is simply not the case. On my behalf and on behalf of my party, I confirm that I am committed to upgrading — not simply maintaining — that section of railway network as quickly as possible. As evidence of that, I recently committed £7 million in funding for immediate engineering works. That is a point that Mr Dickson was looking for clarity on. That

demonstrates a clear commitment to the future of the line, and that work is already in planning.

I agree that the railway service to and from Londonderry is an important investment for the north-west region and for the overall development of Northern Ireland. Creating fast, reliable and comfortable train services will bring benefits to all parts of Northern Ireland and could help attract and support major cultural and sporting events in the future, such as a major golf tournament in Portrush. It could also play an important role in developing tourist opportunities.

The original relay project is about securing the life of the line over 30 years. I know that stakeholders and political representatives from the north-west are expressing concern about the delay in the commencement of the Coleraine to Londonderry track relay project, and I will try to outline my understanding of the circumstances that led to that delay and the detail of the current plans.

Before Budget 2010, Translink had already begun preparations to take forward and complete the track relay. An economic appraisal was sent to the Department for Regional Development and, because the estimated costs of £75 million were above the delegated limit, it was forwarded to the Department of Finance and Personnel for approval. That approval was received in November 2010. The aim was to have the work completed by the end of 2012 or the start of 2013. The recommended option at that time envisaged a full track relay and it was hoped that the project would start as soon as funding could be secured.

As part of the outworking of Budget 2010, my predecessor decided to defer the start of the Coleraine to Londonderry track relay project until 2014. In fact, funding of £20 million was allocated for 2014-15 to allow the project to proceed at that time. That decision, which was made by my predecessor, Mr Murphy the Sinn Féin Member for Newry and Armagh, took account of the budget constraints faced, but it was also clear that the full relay —

Mr P Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kennedy: No, I will not. I have heard quite a lot today, and you are going to get it now.

It was clear that the full relay could not be completed for the start of 2013, Londonderry's

year as City of Culture. That was confirmed in a written response to Mr George Robinson, a Member for East Londonderry, on 21 February 2011, from my predecessor, who clarified the situation. The issue was raised as part of the consultation on the budget, but the budget position did not change when it was finalised. There are those, like Mr McQuillan, who blame it on the Conservative Party, those from Sinn Féin who blame it on the Ulster Unionist Party and those who, perhaps, suggest it was Danny Kennedy's fault. It was not. That is the current situation. I hope the House and one of the sponsors of the motion will accept the background to the issue that I am outlining now. I await that clarification in his final remarks.

To emphasise the importance of securing the future of the line under any option now taken forward, my Department is providing £7 million so that Translink can plan and implement a programme of engineering work to maintain safety on the line and to keep the line operational. However, while that work is in progress, there will be a need, for safety reasons, to reduce train services between Coleraine and Londonderry from nine services a day to five services a day, with speed limits in place. However, public transport provision between Coleraine and Londonderry will be increased overall from nine services daily to 15 services daily by co-ordinating rail and Goldline coach services. By using that approach, Translink plans to deliver an integrated bus and rail service throughout the day. However, I must emphasise that the use of buses is required to maintain effective public transport services when work on the railway line is ongoing. That should not be interpreted or sold in any way as an underhand attempt to permanently discontinue rail services between Coleraine and Londonderry. Those who peddle such a view do no service to those who want to continue to use the railway service between Coleraine and Londonderry. It is also critical that Members appreciate that a closure of the line will be required at some stage to enable major capital works to be completed, whatever the timing. That is inevitable, because of the condition of the line.

Once the immediate safety works are completed, Translink will be in a position to continue providing five services a day for some time, with a view to introducing a fully enhanced service when the full relay is completed. The aim of moving to an hourly service and improved speed depends on the track relay or a

variant of that project. As is currently the case, commuters from Belfast to Londonderry can use the Goldline 212 service before 9.00 am.

I will outline the sequence of events. Once Translink developed a corporate plan based on budgets notified, it initiated a period of consultation on different aspects of the plan over the summer. That raised a number of concerns about rail services, particularly from representatives in the north-west. However, the question rightly put today by a number of Members, including the Chairman of the Regional Development Committee and other local representatives, is "What happened to the £75 million allocated to DRD for the Coleraine to Londonderry upgrade?". Here it is: it was never the case that £75 million was allocated to my Department for that project.

The DRD submitted a bid for £75 million for that upgrade as part of the CSR 2010 exercise. Allocations were made to all Departments based on available budgets and taking account of contractual commitments. The DRD considered the available funding and made decisions about how that funding should be allocated across the Department. It must be noted that the £75 million referred to was never separately allocated in the budget within this Department, because it always depended on the outcome of the CSR 2010. The budget outcome — the Minister responsible was Conor Murphy — meant that the relay was deferred to 2014, with £20 million allocated to the 2014-15 year. That was the basis of consultations on the DRD budget until April 2011.

I have recognised the difficulties in light of the concerns raised with me about the current plans. I could, very easily, dump on the previous Minister. I could even dump on the previous Executive or on the Finance Minister. I could dump on Uncle Tom Copley and all, but I am not prepared to do that. I have initiated discussion with key stakeholders in the north-west. Members are aware of that; it has been referred to. I attended a meeting with political representatives and other interested groups in the council chamber in the Guildhall. I asked to be part of that meeting and was able, at least, to hear at first hand the concerns, as indeed I was today. I have also raised the issues with my Executive colleagues and, separately, with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I give the House and Members the assurance that I will continue to review options and discussions

on what is technically and financially feasible. Any revised proposals would have to be considered in the light of budget constraints and demonstrate value for money, but I will be active in pursuing this.

Not only am I committed to the upgrade of the Coleraine to Londonderry line, I would like to see options pursued to develop the line further, with high-speed intercity rail links between Londonderry, Belfast, Dublin and Cork. Such a vision is very much in line with European Union thinking, which emphasises the role of the railways in the future development of all regions. We need to be realistic about what is achievable and affordable in the short term, but I am committed to pursuing those opportunities.

In conclusion, let me firmly reiterate my commitment and that of my political party, the Ulster Unionist Party, to developing the Coleraine to Londonderry railway line. Yes, it is a very scenic line; Michael Palin is right. However, it is vital we ensure that it is also a safe route. We want it to be brought forward on that basis as quickly as possible. I assure Members that I intend to actively monitor and pursue these matters with Translink, my officials, my Executive colleagues and the House.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister and those who contributed to what was, undoubtedly, an extensive and wide-ranging debate. By and large, it was a fairly comprehensive debate that covered a lot of ground and a lot of railway line. For example, my colleague Adrian McQuillan, who proposed the motion, covered very comprehensively the issues on the line, including the number of students and workers who use the line for commuting, the UK City of Culture issue, which seemed to permeate quite a number of contributions, the congestion that occurs on our roads and the overall government cutbacks that have brought us to this issue today, to which the Minister alluded — more of which anon.

5.45 pm

Mr McQuillan's contribution was followed by that of the Member for Foyle Mr McCartney, who referred to the Minister's recent visit to the Guildhall in Londonderry. A number of Members — Pat Ramsey and others — also referred to that. I was there myself. The Minister got a flavour of the views held, as they were made very clear to him. There was a comprehensive response, with one exception. In that meeting,

one reference was made to the decision not to proceed as a sectarian one, which others and I deeply resent: Protestants use the railway line as well. Some people need to learn that. That reference was made in passing at the Guildhall meeting. It was very unfortunate, and I hope that that sentiment was not shared by anyone else in the room. One of the campaigners made that ludicrous, absurd and unacceptable reference.

Mr McCartney also referred to the options paper of 2001. For once, that was a helpful contribution from Mr McCartney, which is more than can be said for his contributions on previous occasions. It gives me the opportunity to say that there was indeed an options paper drawn up by one of Mr Kennedy's predecessors, namely me. The options presented in the paper were total closure of the line or retention of it and building it up for the future. I very clearly indicated how I would like to see the decision go. The 2001 paper should have put the notion that the line was to close into a grave from which there was no resurrection; unfortunately, it has not done that.

Mr Beggs is not in his place, like many others from that neck of the woods. He indicated the similarities between the railway line in the north-west and in east Antrim and made some pertinent points. He also raised the issue of the A5 dual carriageway, which came up on a number of occasions, and asked whether the money for it was in the Budget.

John Dallat, the Member for East Londonderry, referred to the reduction in the number of trains, which he heard about in the summer. Then he used a phrase which, unfortunately, people use from time to time when such announcements are made:

"people fear that this is the end".

That is what the Minister has to nail finally: any concept that this line is up for closure.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. I place on record my support for the motion and add a caveat. We need to resist the notion that the issue is somehow only the line from Coleraine to Londonderry; it is about that from Belfast to Londonderry. We do a disservice to Members who have spoken on the issue. As a Member for North Antrim, I value greatly the railway line that we have, and the Minister is well aware of the issues that we have raised

with him about it. Will the Member ensure that the debate on this issue is all-inclusive, that it includes the line from Belfast to Londonderry and that we do not segregate it into pieces, which would be to the detriment of the whole campaign?

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for his contribution. That sentiment was prevalent throughout the debate. Members from across geographical as well as political lines indicated support in various ways and for various reasons.

I conclude on John Dallat's comments. He managed to insert a reference to the Good Friday Agreement. I am afraid that, at that stage, I glazed over. I could not see that concept there, but he managed to. He indicated that there was a sizeable increase in the numbers using the line, and that is relevant.

Stewart Dickson talked about the lack of commitment that must be addressed and the need for a "can-do" attitude. That is to be commended, and I hope that the Minister will adopt such an attitude.

Jimmy Spratt talked about the award of UK City of Culture to Londonderry and the benefits that Northern Ireland as a whole would derive from it. He made a pertinent point about Liverpool, which derived £750 million of economic activity from being European City of Culture. He said that, if we could get just 10% of that, it would be £75 million.

Pat Ramsey said that this should not be seen as either just a Londonderry or even just a north-west issue, because a number of the events that will take place as a result of the successful UK City of Culture bid will be Northern Ireland-wide events, from which everyone across the country will benefit.

Cathal Ó hOisín gave us a bit of history and background to the railway lines and talked about the number of people who are increasingly using the line, as well as the scenic beauty of the line. Yet again, Michael Palin was quoted, and I am sure that it is about the most often used quote that has ever been made, yet it is relevant and appropriate.

Mike Nesbitt talked about the need to get the issue into a broader context to make the right choices, and I hope that the Minister makes the right choice. Joe Byrne also talked about the strategic route and referred to the UK City of

Culture again, and there is much merit in that comment.

Pat Ramsey talked admirably about the equitable and fair decisions that need to be made and referred to the Guildhall meeting at which the Minister received the message loud and clear. He also talked about the usage of the line by students from Coleraine to Londonderry and from Londonderry to Coleraine. Steven Agnew took the opportunity to promote the green project in respect of sustainable transport, and that is fair enough. Although he seemed to indicate that it was a case of roads versus sustainable transport, many of us would say that it is not an either/or option. It should be a case of trying to develop roads and railways. He also talked about the benefits that would flow from that sustainable transport. David McClarty talked about the line being the artery to Northern Ireland's heart. That is accurate and appropriate.

In replying, the Minister said — I know that he has said it before — that he wanted to dispel the notion of closure. He also indicated the £7 million spend. We thank him for that and, hopefully, it will be the first element of much more spending. He then talked about the previous Minister's decision. At some time between last summer, when the new Government came into power in London, and this summer, when we had our Assembly elections, there was a definitive move in respect of funding. Whether it was the previous Minister or the existing Minister, the point is that the money that most of us assumed 18 months ago would be there to upgrade the line is not there. At some point, a decision was taken that the money that we anticipated would be there would not, in fact, be there. What most of us here want to know is how and when we are going to get that money to ensure that the line is upgraded.

In closing, I want to make a point that I do not think has been made until now. Reference has been made to the massive increase in the number of people using the single-track line between Coleraine and Londonderry. A passing loop somewhere between Eglinton and Ballykelly would allow the potential to double the number of trains and passengers. A commitment from the Minister in the next 12 months not just that he wants to maintain the line and upgrade it but that he wants to put money into the beginnings of the provision of that passing loop would send a message that not only is the line not going

to close but its maintenance, improvement and upgrading is at the top of his agenda. We look forward to getting that sort of commitment from the Minister and seeing it in place for the UK City of Culture and so that everyone in Northern Ireland can use what Michael Palin told us all was a tremendous line.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Regional Development to ensure the future of the Londonderry railway line, which links Coleraine with Londonderry and which connects the east and west of Northern Ireland.

Adjourned at 5.54 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 13 September 2011

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Languages

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Speaker. With your permission and in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the twelfth North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in language sectoral format, the eighth since the restoration of the Executive and the Assembly and the first held in 2011. This statement has been agreed with junior Minister Bell, who was the accompanying Minister.

I attended the meeting in Armagh on 7 July 2011 representing the Executive as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure along with Jonathan Bell MLA, junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). The Irish Government were represented by Jimmy Deenihan TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht Affairs and Dinny McGinley TD, Minister of State with special responsibility for Gaeltacht affairs. The meeting dealt with issues relating to the language body and its two constituent agencies, Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch — hopefully, I pronounced that right — and Foras na Gaeilge, the Irish language agency. I will now present a summary of the issues that the Council discussed.

The Council received presentations and progress reports from Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency on the collaborative work and other activities of the two agencies. Those include further joint development of their lecture series 'Aspects of our Shared Heritage' and plans to provide evening community education lectures in conjunction with local councils; provision of joint information stands at events

such as the national ploughing championships, the Castlewellan agricultural show and the Stormont family fun day; the first accreditation system for Irish language editors, which was held by Foras na Gaeilge on 25 June 2011, and the launch of new supports for the Irish language translation sector; and approval of funding by Foras na Gaeilge for 50 summer camps that provide valuable opportunities for children to use Irish outside the school environment and for 47 festivals to promote the language in the community at large. They also include the approval by the Ulster-Scots Agency of almost 300 grants for grass-roots communities to undertake music and dance tuition and for 32 Ulster-Scots festivals, as well as an extension of the community workers scheme, which continues to impact positively on Ulster-Scots activities by improving capacity in community groups; and delivery by the Ulster-Scots Agency of a range of educational programmes, including eight after-school clubs and 32 community summer school schemes that will engage children and young people in Ulster-Scots language and culture.

The Council discussed progress on the development of the North/South Language Body's corporate plan for 2011-13 and its business plan and budget for 2011. The Council noted that the language body's 2007 accounts were laid in the Oireachtas and, indeed, in the Assembly on 10 June 2011 and that audit fieldwork has been completed for the annual reports and accounts for 2008 and 2009. Consolidation will follow as soon as possible. Draft accounts have been filed for 2010. The Council also noted that it is proposed to introduce a new, simplified consolidation process as soon as possible and that a further progress report on that will be given at the next NSMC language body meeting.

The Council noted that all draft schemes that are required to implement the recommendations

of the review have now been drawn up. Following consideration of comments that were made during the recent public consultation exercise, the approval of the board and the Finance Ministers will be sought, prior to submitting the schemes to the next meeting of the NSMC for approval.

The Council agreed that, in the context of continuing to achieve satisfactory progress, Foras na Gaeilge may continue to provide interim funding to existing funded organisations until the end of June 2012. A further progress report will be made at the next NSMC meeting in language sectoral format.

The Council noted the recommendations of the review of the Ulster-Scots Agency's financial assistance scheme. It agreed to hold its next meeting in language sectoral format in October or November 2011.

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I note that the Council proposes to introduce a new, simplified, consolidated process for publication of the language body's annual accounts and report. Can the Minister be much more specific about the timetable for delivery of that process and give assurances that there will be no future delay in the publication of accounts and reports?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. The issue was raised by my predecessor, her party colleague Nelson McCausland. The lengthy and arduous accounting process is due to the fact that there are two jurisdictions, two sets of accounting procedures and two Finance Ministers. The overall audit trail has caused considerable delay. Consolidation is the way to proceed. We anticipate that consolidation will be defined by the next language sectoral meeting. Thereafter, there should be a consolidated process, which will make accounting much quicker and easier. It will certainly benefit both organisations in question.

Mr McMullan: Are the Ulster-Scots Agency's staffing arrangements appropriate to its needs?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sorry. Can the Member repeat the question?

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to repeat his question.

Mr McMullan: Sorry. Are the Ulster-Scots Agency's staffing arrangements appropriate to its needs?

Ms Ní Chuilín: In short, the answer is yes. A review of the agency's staffing structure was carried out in 2009 and, again, in September 2010. The review identified the most appropriate senior structure for the agency, including job descriptions. Indeed, descriptions for senior roles, with the associated level of grading, have been achieved. They will include specifications of the staff knowledge and skill sets that are required for each role.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her statement. She mentioned the provision of joint information stands at events such as the national ploughing championships and the Stormont family fun day. Can she give details of other events at which those stands might be present and how costs will be borne out and apportioned between the two bodies?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Quite a list of events has taken place as well as those proposed, and I am happy to furnish the Member with the details, including the costs. I do not have details of the costs here. There is a list that is too long to read out, but I am happy to furnish the Member with all the details as requested. The joint approach by both agencies to get information out about their work is to be welcomed, and further activities of that nature can certainly be achieved with more joined-up working.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas atá sí i ndiaidh a dhéanamh. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire ar phléigh sí an tionscnamh "Líofa" ag an chruinniú chomhaireachta agus ar smaoinigh sí ar an tionscnamh a chur ar fáil ar bhonn uile-oileánda faoi Fhoras na Gaeilge, ó is eagraíocht í a bhfuil a Roinn féin ina hurra uirthi.

Did the Minister discuss the Líofa project at the North/South Ministerial Council? Has she considered delivering it on an all-island basis through Foras na Gaeilge, which is an organisation that her Department sponsors?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. As he can see from the statement, Líofa is not mentioned. If Líofa had been discussed at the meeting, it would have been mentioned in the statement. I am happy to discuss Líofa in further detail with the Member at the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure on Thursday. In short, Líofa is just being taken forward by my Department. Foras na Gaeilge is assisting with that. We just need to see what

way the programme develops and what the uptake is before deciding on where to go with it and what to do with it in future.

Mr Lunn: From a quick count in the statement, there are about 450 separate events, which is terrific and is great activity by both organisations. Does the Minister have any figures for what all this costs? What is the level of funding to each organisation, and are there any plans to make them more self-sustaining?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I will furnish all Members with the list of activities that happened and the associated costs.

Needless to say, both organisations have funded the programmes from their budgets. The sustaining of such activities, particularly when they promote good and better relations throughout the island, is to be welcomed, and others, should they be from the private sector or other agencies, could lend themselves to such work and take some of the cost burden. I do not have all the definitive details at hand, but I am happy to furnish the Member and others with them.

Mr Irwin: Will the Minister provide more detail on the recommendations of the review of the Ulster-Scots Agency's financial assistance scheme?

Ms Ní Chuilín: To be honest, I do not have all the detail at hand. However, the Member is probably aware that there were three categories that the review concentrated on, namely, agency level, cross-cutting group level and specific group level. Some of the key recommendations relating to those categories are quite extensive, but, to give the Member a flavour of them, they include provision of strategic guidance to the groups through the development of a strategy for the sector and the agency ensuring that each of the groups delivers to an appropriate action plan.

The recommendations are with the Finance Minister for approval, but the agency was consulted throughout the review, so it will not be a case of imposing something on anyone.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas.

How will any recommendations from the review of Foras na Gaeilge impact on core-funded groups in the North?

10.45 am

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. The review of Foras na Gaeilge and core-funded bodies has generated a lot of interest, and there is a lot of concern. Officials from both sponsoring Departments have worked and will continue to work with Foras na Gaeilge to agree the detail of the review's proposals and a timescale for their implementation. The well-documented need for continued consultation in that sector was highlighted, and that work is being progressed. In that context and as mentioned in previous answers, the extensive nature of the review is the reason why we have proposed extending funding for Foras na Gaeilge and the language body until June 2012. That will help them to achieve the recommendations of the review and to work with the groups that are directly affected by that review. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for her statement. Given the many pressures that are on some of our other services, will the Minister indicate what, if any, good housekeeping measures were discussed at the meeting? Members heard of similar measures being taken in some of the other North/South bodies during yesterday's statements by other Ministers.

Ms Ní Chuilín: If the Member is referring to governance and efficiency, my response is that statements have been made by Mr Jimmy Deenihan TD about the pressures on the Irish Government's Budget. There has been much speculation on the back of those statements, but no decisions have yet been taken. Minister Deenihan and I have planned a series of meetings between sectoral meetings to look at efficiencies, governance, projects and better delivery, and those meetings are particularly important given the financial constraints that we all face. In addition, Minister Deenihan and I have agreed to work together and with both Finance Ministers to help to achieve those efficiencies.

Mr McGimpsey: I will follow on from the previous question. Bearing in mind the financial constraints that the health service, in particular, is facing and the difficulties that it is rapidly getting into, is it not appalling for the language body to have an accounting process in which the accounts for 2007 were laid only in June of this year and for which a consolidation process is now being proposed?

In her statement, the Minister outlined the introduction of:

“a new simplified consolidation process as soon as possible”.

Will she tell me on what date approximately that will be implemented? What does “as soon as possible” mean when trying to get some sort of financial discipline into that reporting?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I think that we could all agree that it is appalling that the Member for South Belfast is still playing politics with health. As to the consolidation of the accounts, the next meeting in language sectoral format is scheduled for 13 October, and I anticipate being able to confirm a specific date soon after that. Consolidation is about making the process easier and ensuring that people across the island can understand the workings of both bodies, how their accounts are compiled and what the money is spent on. Given the Member’s background, I would have thought that he would welcome that, rather than pouring water on the fact that people are trying to be more accountable and transparent. Well done — you are consistent anyway.

Mrs McKeivitt: Will the Minister provide to Members the results of the equality impact screening exercise on the core-funded Irish language organisations?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am happy to do that. As far as I am aware, the results of that equality impact assessment have been published. However, I will check and make sure that they have.

Mrs McKeivitt: They have not been published.

Ms Ní Chuilín: OK. I will make sure that they are.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for her statement. Is she able to elaborate on the extension of the community workers scheme, which continues to impact positively on Ulster-Scots activities by improving capacity in community groups?

Ms Ní Chuilín: There is quite a lot of detail on that in the statement, and quite a lot of work has been done by the Ulster-Scots Agency in that area. I am on record as having said that it is to be welcomed that that body changed the direction of its funding and took money from marketing, for example, and put it into the community. There is plenty of detail about the schemes. There are over 300 such schemes, including after-school programmes. If she wants

to know anything specific, I will forward the information to the Member and all Members. However, separate to what I have outlined in the statement, I could be reading this out for the next 10 minutes.

Mr Allister: Considering that the Minister did not even know that the core funding review had not been equality impact assessed, which is quite appalling for a Minister, I do not have much confidence in seeking any information from her. However, I will take the focus back to the appalling failure of financial management in relation to the Irish language bodies, which took from 2007 to 2011 to produce accounts. The Minister may not be appalled by that, but I suspect that the taxpayers who fund these quangos will most certainly be appalled. Does she not recognise that that is exactly the sort of issue that drains confidence from any public body and causes one to question why we are pouring money into these useless, non-productive quangos?

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to come to his question, please.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I detected a statement rather than a question. If the Member wants to write to me, I am happy to answer his question. He actually writes to me quite a lot every day. Jim and I have become firm friends. If he asks a specific question, I will be happy to answer him.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for a Minister to mislead the House by suggesting that I wrote to her the other day —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Allister: — when I write consistently to the permanent secretary?

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat.

Mr Storey: Salving your conscience.

Mr Speaker: Let me say to the Member — *[Interruption.]* Order. The Member should take his seat.

Mr Allister: You should be the last man to talk about conscience. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me say this to the Member: using that type of language is very unparliamentary. I warn the Member about accusing any Minister of misleading the House. I warn the Member. The Member should remain

in his seat. Let us move on to the next item of business.

Mr Allister: On a point of order —

Mr Speaker: Order. I am moving on.

North/South Ministerial Council: Inland Waterways

Mr Speaker: I have been informed by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that she wishes to make a second statement to the House.

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Mr Speaker, with your permission, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 regarding a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in inland waterways sectoral format. The meeting was held in Armagh on 7 July 2011.

The Executive were represented by me as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and junior Minister Jonathan Bell from the Office of the First and deputy First Minister. The Irish Government were represented by Jimmy Deenihan TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht Affairs. The statement has been agreed with junior Minister Bell, and I make it on behalf of us both.

The Council received a presentation and progress report from the chief executive of Waterways Ireland on its work, including the following significant achievements: the provision of 484 metres of additional moorings, of which 84 metres have been provided at Castle Hume in County Fermanagh; the sponsorship programme that is under way, with over 70 events being sponsored across all navigations; the provision of new publications to promote and support the use of the waterways; the completion of a number of product development studies involving relevant tourism authorities and local authorities with the aims of defining the future needs and future investment in the waterways from a navigational, recreational and tourism perspective; progress on the EU INTERREG IVC Waterways Forward project with 17 partners from 13 countries, which will include Waterways Ireland hosting a meeting of all parties from 13 to 16 September 2011; and the Lakelands and Inland Waterways initiative and a marketing campaign for the Erne-Shannon system, which continued in this period.

The Council discussed progress on the development of the Waterways Ireland corporate plan 2011-2013 and business plan and budget 2011.

The Council received a progress report on the restoration work for the Clones to Upper Lough

Erne section of the Ulster canal. Ministers noted that a preferred route had been identified and a preliminary design is now well developed. It was noted that planning would be applied for in both jurisdictions in summer 2011. Work on the strategic environmental assessment and plan has been completed and published, and work on the environmental impact assessment is ongoing. Waterways Ireland has held meetings with all relevant public authorities to advise them on the project.

The Council noted the Waterways Ireland annual report and draft accounts for 2010. The annual report and accounts will be laid before the Assembly and both Houses of the Oireachtas following the accounts' certification. The Council consented to a number of property disposals, all in the South of Ireland, and agreed to meet again in inland waterways sectoral format in October/November 2011.

Miss M McIlveen (Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): What assurance can the Minister give following the July NSMC meeting that the full costs of the works from Clones to Upper Lough Erne can be met and are on course for completion, given press speculation that this project may be the casualty of budget cuts by the Irish Republic's Government?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I mentioned this in my previous statement. The Member is right: there has been quite a lot of speculation in the press about concerns around constraints on the Irish Government's ability to meet the full costs of the restoration of the Ulster canal, particularly from Minister Jimmy Deenihan TD. As I have said, I intend to meet Minister Deenihan to discuss this matter in full. It is vital. Members and the public across the island, particularly people from around Clones and Fermanagh, have raised concerns with me that this will not be achieved.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister explain how the interests of landowners affected by any major construction works will be protected?

Ms Ní Chuilín: There has been quite a lot of interest from concerned landowners, particularly in the South. However, a huge programme of consultation will be completed before any compulsory purchase order comes through. Work will be done with landowners well before anyone's property is bought. This process has been ongoing for some time, and speculation

in some of the local newspapers has not made things any easier. However, unless anyone tells me differently, I am led to believe that landowners have been consulted on the process and that they are being worked with on a regular basis.

Mr Swann: I acknowledge the Minister's statement. She mentioned property disposals made in the Republic of Ireland. Can she outline whether any property disposals are expected in Northern Ireland?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not been informed of any property disposals here, but I am expecting to be updated on that at the end of the week. I am meeting Mr Deenihan on a different issue concerning European funding, but I intend to raise the matter of the Ulster canal. Some of the questions raised today have not been covered by the information that I have received from my officials. Those will be raised and forwarded to Members where appropriate.

Mrs McKeivitt: Can the Minister explain why the Newry canal is not included in the remit of Waterways Ireland's corporate plan for 2011-13?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am sorry; I did not catch that.

Mr Speaker: Can you repeat the question, please?

Mrs McKeivitt: Certainly. Can the Minister explain why the Newry canal is not included in the remit of Waterways Ireland's corporate plan for 2011-13?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The issue of the Newry canal has been raised locally. Work has been done on footbridges and environmental works, but I am not aware that there are any plans for a full restoration to a working canal. No such plans have been earmarked to be brought through in this mandate.

Mr Lunn: Mrs McKeivitt has stolen my thunder, so I will ask about the Lagan navigation. Are there any plans to restore that vital piece of infrastructure?

11.00 am

Ms Ní Chuilín: I visited the towpath recently and saw the Lock Keeper's Inn, the environmental work and the footpath, and I am aware of the different councils' involvement in that. Again, it is all down to money. I can appreciate the importance of full restoration, but it is really all down to budgetary constraints. Until there is a change in circumstances, I do not anticipate any further restoration.

Mr Irwin: With reference to the product development studies, the Committee was informed in June that studies have taken place on the Shannon/Erne waterway and the Erne, Foyle and Dublin city canals, and that studies in Northern Ireland are planned for 2011-12. Can the Minister confirm whether any of those studies have been completed in Northern Ireland? What assurances can she give that the studies will be implemented jointly with the relevant agencies and will involve the private sector?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I cannot confirm that. I will forward the information to the Member.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Given the folly of the neglect and dereliction that followed partition, particularly in respect of the Ulster canal, will you now give us an estimated cost of the restoration of said canal?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The full restoration cost is €35 million, which was committed by the Irish Government, with £40,000 per annum from us for the upkeep, based on full restoration. That is the full cost.

Mr Hilditch: Thank you for the statement. There were 13 countries involved in the EU INTERREG IVc project. Can the Minister indicate at this early stage any impact that the current economic situation has had on visitor numbers to the inland waterways and lakelands?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I said earlier, we are meeting some of the 17 partners from some of the 13 countries this week in relation to the INTERREG programme. It is estimated that possibly around 70,000 to 80,000 people have attended different events as part of the waterways programme. In relation to the EU-funded programme, this week we hope to consolidate lessons learned, knowledge gained and what we would do differently. It is really good to listen to the experience of other countries — Holland has taken the lead on it — to learn how we can improve our waterways as an attractive option for tourism.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank the Minister for the statement. We are aware that a large number of people work for Waterways Ireland in Northern Ireland. Does the Minister have any information on any anticipated or possible job losses in Northern Ireland as a result of the financial constraints that all Departments are facing?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have no information on anticipated job losses, despite the fact that there are financial constraints. Both bodies have already encouraged efficiencies, although there is a myth that they do not. I have no information that there will be any job losses, but I will check with my officials and, if there is any such information, I will let you know.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister tell us what Waterways Ireland is doing to raise the profile of inland waterways as a key tourism product?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The marketing and promotion strategy includes not only Waterways Ireland but a market advisory group, which comprises the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Fáilte Ireland and representatives from local government. Arising from a review in 2004, the marketing strategy was formulated for 2011-16 to take on experience gained since the last review, to talk to partners from other countries who are involved in tourism around waterways and to build on the success that they have achieved.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as an ráiteas a rinne sí ar Uiscebhealaí Éireann. Tá ceist bheag agam di. Will the Minister undertake to amend the legislation that governs Waterways Ireland to include the Newry canal in its remit?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I cannot give the Member a commitment to do that.

Mr Dallat: On a positive note, I congratulate Waterways Ireland on the excellent work that it has done to promote the lower Bann. Given the shortage of cash in the coffers of the two Governments, what discussions have there been about attracting investment from the private sector? Does the Minister agree that the potential for job creation in the lower Bann, for example, is immense if only we had the encouragement of and investment from the private sector to put money into much safer places than it did in the past, when it put money into property development?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am not going to comment on property development, but I see the merit in trying to attract private investment. Private sector development on Lough Erne is already quite healthy, as evidenced by the boats and water tourism there. Securing additional EU money or private money for promoting tourism,

particularly for waterways, is something that I aim to make a priority. I see the value of it, particularly for the communities that live and work around the waterways, more often than not in rural areas. It would be a real boost to the rural economy if waterways were further developed.

Access to Justice Review

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the Access to Justice review. Members will have heard me speak previously, in this Chamber and elsewhere, of the opportunities that the devolution of justice provided us with, including the opportunity to reshape our justice system to fit the needs of Northern Ireland. Members will also recall that, with that in mind, in September 2010 I commissioned a fundamental review to develop our thinking on how best to ensure access to justice in our society. Today, I am pleased to publish the report of the review and to begin a period of public consultation on its findings and recommendations.

Fair and effective access to justice is an essential element of getting justice right; it is critical to building confidence and is an important part of our vision for a future justice system. Our present system is built on providing financial assistance to those who could not otherwise find the money to pay for legal representation. However, I wanted a review that would examine other approaches and better ways of using the funds available. I thank Jim Daniell and his team for their very detailed work over many months to produce the report. I also thank those who offered comments or who otherwise contributed to it.

The report is a comprehensive analysis, containing 159 conclusions and recommendations. I encourage Members to read it carefully. Since I became Minister of Justice, legal aid has been one of the areas prompting members of the public to write to me. I know that many Members have also received correspondence about situations where the system appears not to work well. In my replies I have said that I expect the report to provide ideas for solving some of those problems, and I believe that it does. Public consultation on the report will last three months. Many people and organisations made representations to the review team as its work progressed, and I thank all those who offered ideas or who shared their experience of the system. It is important that all who wish to comment be given the opportunity to tell us what they think needs to be changed.

Having considered those comments, I will make a formal response in the new year. However, I reassure Members that the period of public

consultation will not hold up the delivery of changes that we are already making and which have been endorsed by the report. In the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 the Assembly legislated for new powers that will allow the recovery of legal aid costs from convicted defendants who can pay. That development has been endorsed by the report, and I will shortly be publishing proposals for commencing those powers.

The report suggests that responsibility for financial assessment for such a means test should fall to the Legal Services Commission (LSC). It also proposes that the Legal Services Commission should take on the responsibility for decisions to certify for the use of counsel in Magistrate's Courts. That responsibility currently rests with the judiciary, and I will want to consider carefully the views of the Lord Chief Justice and the Attorney General about the proposed change.

There are other areas where the findings of the report coincide with work already under way. The report highlights the importance of continuing to scrutinise legal aid expenditure, noting that, over the past financial year, spending on legal aid in Magistrate's Courts rose by around 38%. That was partly because of an increase in the volume of cases, but higher average costs also appear to have played a large part. A review of legal aid fees paid for cases in the Magistrate's Courts began last month, and that exercise will consider the issues identified in the report.

Running alongside the review of Magistrate's Courts fees will be a review of the fees paid for legal advice given to those under arrest and held in police stations. That is particularly important for people being investigated for criminal offences, and it has been endorsed as a requirement by European human rights case law. Good early advice is essential to ensure that a defendant's rights are protected. The report recommends improvements to current arrangements, particularly the establishment of a more formal duty solicitor scheme across Northern Ireland. There are useful models for that in other jurisdictions, and, picking up on those recommendations, the review that has just begun will look at how our system could be improved.

The report notes the public concern that has been expressed about what appear to be disproportionate costs to the legal aid fund

and to the justice system as a whole when defendants elect for trial by jury at the Crown Court in cases of alleged dishonesty involving goods or cash of relatively low value. In the past year, there were a small number of high profile cases. Although the report concludes that the right to elect for trial by jury should remain, it makes helpful proposals on how costs could be contained.

The report considers diversionary measures and alternatives to prosecution for less serious first- and second-time offenders, including fixed penalty notices, prosecutorial fines and conditional cautions. In recent years, some progress has been made in Northern Ireland, especially in the field of restorative justice, but the report suggests that a more ambitious approach could yield positive results. It suggests that Northern Ireland, with a centralised prosecution service and the PSNI covering the whole of the jurisdiction, is particularly well suited to such an approach. The report commends, in particular, the approach taken in Scotland, and we will want to look carefully at that.

The report looks at the possibility of introducing one standard fee to apply whether there is a guilty plea or the case goes to trial — as is the case in Scotland — as a measure to avoid unnecessarily prolonging some cases. It suggests that further research is needed, and I have asked officials to take the matter forward as part of the work already under way through the Speeding up Justice programme.

Members will know that, in recent months, in response to the withdrawal by many solicitors from Crown Court cases, I had to consider the emergency introduction of a public defender service to ensure that unrepresented defendants would have access to the legal advice and assistance to which they are entitled under the European Convention on Human Rights and the Human Rights Act 1998. I am pleased to confirm that such withdrawal action has now ended and that the contingency plans that were being developed have not been necessary.

The report notes, however, that public defender arrangements are in place in Scotland and in England and Wales. Although the report emphasises the benefits of the independent private sector legal professions, particularly their clear independence from the state, it states that it is right to undertake contingency

planning to fill gaps in supply. Emergency measures are not required immediately, but, in response to the report, I would welcome comments on whether such a service should be introduced here.

The report rightly records that the interests of victims and witnesses are central to the justice system, and it notes the work that has been done and continues to be developed by the Department of Justice, the Criminal Justice Board and a range of public and voluntary sector agencies. That work remains a high priority for my Department, and, in the coming months, it is something on which we will work closely with the Justice Committee.

In looking at civil legal aid, the report considers how to give priority to the most vulnerable in society and how to encourage early dispute resolution. It finds that cases concerning family and children account for 70% of the current spend on civil legal aid, which is clearly a problem that needs to be addressed. Unlike the current proposal in England and Wales, which would remove private family law cases from the scope on civil legal aid, the review team recommends that legal aid should continue to be available for those who are financially eligible in such cases, but that the system should discourage the use of the court to prolong or reopen disputes. The report notes that many cases do not necessarily need to be resolved in a court hearing, and it recommends the use of mediation, collaborative interventions or other alternatives to court proceedings. It makes a number of detailed proposals on legal aid costs in family cases. For example, as legal aid for undefended divorce cases that are heard in chambers requires a minimum of legal work, it does not warrant the presence of counsel. The report proposes that legal aid funding in such cases should be limited to an appropriate standard fee.

11.15 am

The report also identifies public law children's cases as an area in which costs could be reduced without risking harm to the quality of the outcome. The number of parties that receive publicly funded representation, the level of representation, the type of legal representation that is appropriate to the court tier and the use of expert witnesses are identified as other areas in which savings might be made. In that area, the report's findings go much wider than

legal aid, and it recommends that there be a fundamental review of family justice in Northern Ireland. That is a key issue, and I would very much welcome views on the proposal.

I support the finding that many cases do not necessarily need to be resolved in a court hearing and the recommendation for the use of mediation and other alternatives. My views on that underpinned my decision to commission the review. Some of those are already being used in Northern Ireland, but the report recommends that they be developed further. For example, neighbour disputes and antisocial behaviour may be suitable for community-based alternative dispute resolution (ADR) rather than applications before the court for injunctions or prosecutions.

One significant area that was examined was money damages cases. The report recommends that conditional fee arrangements — that is, no win no fee — should be introduced in Northern Ireland, with safeguards to prevent an escalation in costs with, perhaps, an insurance-based solution that enables plaintiffs to insure against the legal cost of losing.

The cost of civil legal aid, the importance of ensuring that limited resources are properly targeted and the need to ensure value for money are also recurring themes. We have already made significant changes that will reduce the cost of criminal legal aid, and the report recommends significant changes to legal aid fees in civil cases. It proposes the introduction of a standard fee structure and harmonisation of the rules for financial eligibility, and it suggests that consideration be given to increasing the contributions from those who can afford it and the inclusion of housing equity in the calculation of capital limits. On value for money, it recommends the establishment of a statutory registration scheme for providers of legally aided services, together with proportionate and cost-effective systems for monitoring quality.

The report recognises that contracting and best-value tendering could play a part in enabling market pressures to secure efficiencies in service provision. That issue is also addressed in the recent Criminal Justice Inspection report on the use of legal services by the criminal justice system, which was published before the summer. The report also considers the establishment of alternative business models that enable solicitors, barristers and

other professionals to work together in one organisation, as already happens in England and Wales. We will want to look carefully at the experience from other jurisdictions in considering that.

Section 8, which is entitled ‘Living within Budget and the Options for Further Savings’, sets out some detailed proposals for savings. I will consider them very carefully. The report has also made proposals for how we manage access to justice, recommending that all legal aid policy, which is currently split between the Courts and Tribunals Service and the Legal Services Commission, should be brought together in the Department of Justice as part of the new access to justice directorate. However, it states — I completely agree with this principle — that individual decisions on the granting of legal aid should be taken independently of government or political influence. It concludes that the body that is charged with such decisions should remain at arm’s length from the Department. Again, I completely agree with that principle. Whatever changes we make to structures will be to improve efficiency, reduce unnecessary costs and allow us to bring forward necessary reforms as quickly as possible.

The report is very comprehensive, and, once again, I thank Jim Daniell and the small review team for the amount of work that they completed in just 12 months. It is impossible to do justice to it in a brief statement today, but it provides a broad and far-reaching agenda of work for us to take forward in the months and years ahead. Given its importance, I encourage Members and the wider public to read it and comment as part of the consultation.

Mr McCartney (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas seo ar maidin. In the absence of the Chairperson, Paul Givan, I speak on behalf of the Committee. Mr Speaker, you have provided with me some latitude to ask my question, so thank you very much. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney: Níor chuala mé sin. I thank the Minister for his statement, and, of behalf of the Committee, I welcome the publication of the final report, ‘Access to Justice Review’. The Committee looks forward to discussing the findings and conclusions of what is, as the Minister said, a very detailed report. We look

forward to seeing Jim Daniell and his team and, no doubt, the Minister, before the Committee. Given the breadth and scope of the report, does the Minister intend to prioritise the various areas and recommendations that it covers when considering the implementation programme? Will he seek views on what the priority areas should be? What will be the timeline for that consultation? It is important that the Minister say whether there are any recommendations that he feels that the Department can take forward in the absence of the consultation process being completed. That concludes my remarks on behalf of the Committee.

On behalf of my party, I welcome the report. We look forward to the Minister and to Jim Daniell’s review team coming before the Committee. Can the Minister assure the Assembly that the guiding principles will be fair and equitable access to justice?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr McCartney in his role as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee — I think that it is the first time that he has had the opportunity to speak first in that role — and as a member of his party. I welcome the fact that, in both capacities, he has seen virtues in the report. I have no doubt that, in both of those capacities, he will engage thoroughly with Jim Daniell and, no doubt, with my officials and me.

He asked about the prioritisation of recommendations. In my statement I made it clear that some aspects were already covered in the 2011 Act, on which we will be able to carry forward work at an early stage. In other respects, when I say that the report is now out for consultation for 12 weeks, it is because, naively, I put it out for consultation genuinely seeking the views of the public and of the Assembly, particularly the Justice Committee.

Given that there are so many recommendations and that it is such a complex report, there will need to be a significant degree of prioritisation. I will certainly welcome the views that come into that, because I am determined that we should make as much progress as fast as possible on the spirit of partnership that the Department and the Committee have adopted so far. On that basis, we will be taking those forward, and the key principle of fair and equal access to justice for all, which the Member highlighted when speaking for his party, is a key principle for us.

We looked at affordability, and the report has considered that. It has also been doing that

in a way that ensures that we get access to justice; however, that may not necessarily be the adversarial court system that we have been used to. Nonetheless, we will seek to ensure access to justice. For example, that is why we specifically recommend that some issues remain in the scope of assistance in Northern Ireland that have been removed from scope in England and Wales.

Mr S Anderson: I, too, thank the Minister for his statement, and I place on record my thanks to Jim Daniell and his team for a detailed and extensive report. The Minister referred to the report's recommendations on diversionary measures on the community-based alternative dispute resolution. Although I understand the need to avoid expensive court cases where possible, some people might have concerns about softer options. What are the Minister's views?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Anderson for his welcome of the report. When looking at alternative dispute resolution, particularly around the civil area, we are not necessarily looking at something that might be categorised as either a hard or a soft option. We are looking at something that seeks conciliation and a better result for all parties involved than we frequently see from an adversarial court system. Take the different methods of working adopted by the Youth Justice Agency: I certainly do not accept the premise that some options around youth conferencing are in any way easy compared with some of the more traditional systems. Indeed, the concept of a young person having to take restorative action, perhaps by meeting and apologising to the victim and doing community service, may be significantly harder for them than seeing a parent pay a fine for them.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Minister for his statement and, indeed, commend the authors for the detailed and comprehensive report that is before us. There is much to think about and discuss. Given the complexities of the issues in the report and the necessity to engage not just with the Committee and the Assembly but with members of the public beyond the 12-week consultation process, will the Minister outline to us how he envisages we will deal with this in meaningful, bite-sized pieces?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr McCrea for his positive words. I outlined that to some extent in response to the Committee Deputy Chair. First, there is a consultation process, and that will enable

individuals and, in particular, the Committee, of which Mr McCrea is a member, to highlight priorities for action. The Department will, to some extent, have to reflect the importance of addressing particular issues. Some issues will be easier to address, and some will require primary legislation, which will take a bit longer. However, we will ensure that we take the widest possible view. Then, as each individual aspect of the review is implemented, there will be further opportunities for consultation and for public comment.

So, I do not see the 12-week process as the be-all and end-all. It will be the start as we seek to see how we will implement the review, and it will not be done in this Assembly session. It will take a considerable amount of time to carry through all the recommendations, but I believe that we have an extremely valuable opportunity to provide a justice system that works better for all our community. However, I will certainly be keen to hear everyone's word on the best ways to do that and on which points to implement first.

Mr A Maginness: I declare an interest as a member of the Bar. The report is comprehensive, and it would be wrong to be premature in making any assessment of it. Is the Minister prepared to protect access to justice, make it into a paramount principle and not sacrifice the quality of justice and legal services simply because of cost?

Might I ask one further question, Mr Speaker, about a specific aspect of the report? The report says that the Legal Services Commission should take on responsibility for decisions to certify for the use of counsel in the Magistrate's Court. That responsibility currently rests with the judiciary. Is there not an implication in that for the independence of the judiciary? If one is to remove that function from the Magistrate's Court and from district judges, will that not affect the independence of the judiciary?

Mr Ford: I am grateful to Mr Maginness for his work, and I notice that he at least, unlike some others, admits that he is asking more than one question. The specific point about the LSC certifying for counsel is an issue that will require considerable consultation with, among others, the judiciary. I am not sure that I share his concerns about the independence of the judiciary if that power is transferred from the judiciary to the LSC. However, I suspect that

there will be a variety of views on that issue, not least from his professional colleagues.

His other question was about protecting access to justice. I referred to those relatively minor cases where people have elected for trial by jury, and the report recommends that that be preserved despite the public concern that has been expressed. The idea that we seek measures to ensure that there is no abuse to finances while preserving the opportunity for a full trial before a jury is an indication that the report is about preserving access to justice, and I am determined to ensure that we maintain that. We will not go down some of the routes that England and Wales have adopted, which have been thoroughly negative in that respect.

11.30 am

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for coming to us this morning, and congratulations to Mr Daniell on the report prepared for us. I also congratulate the Minister on the innovative steps that he has already taken on access to justice, particularly in settling legal aid matters, over the summer. The alternative dispute resolution proposals are highly innovative and welcome, but will the Minister pilot some of those, as appropriate, so that people can see them working and to prove to the sceptics that ADR is a real and viable alternative in the areas that he outlined?

Mr Ford: That is clearly five in a row, but at least we have a welcome for the report, and I should be grateful for that.

The piloting of ADR mechanisms is the sort of issue about which I hope that the Committee will give me its views. There are significant opportunities for piloting alternative methods. For example, the current president of the Law Society sees particular benefits in mediation as part of his field of professional expertise. From my background as a social worker, I see significant need to move away from the direction in which family law cases have gone in recent years, which is to become excessively adversarial rather than have the opportunity to promote mediation. Whether we can run pilots in geographical patches or simply look at discrete areas of work and see how we apply them is the sort of issue that we need to follow through on in the consultation, but it is one on which I will be keen to hear views.

Clearly, there is an issue around family cases and some around minor monetary cases, where these things can perhaps be piloted in one area of work. It would be worth looking at that to see that we get the best possible opportunities for people to resolve such difficulties in a way that is more satisfying to both parties.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I also thank the Minister for his statement. There is a lack of legal advice and legal representation in cases involving children and young people in issues outside family law. Children's risks go beyond public law and family law justice. Legal representation is absent at education or mental health tribunals that children and young people go to. How will the Minister address that deficit?

Mr Ford: I thank the Member for her welcome. I am not an expert on the operation of education tribunals. I understood that legal representation was available in mental health tribunals, but I will check that point and get back to her.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his statement. The review states that the right to elect for trial by jury "should remain as now". However, it suggests:

"ways of keeping the incidence and costs of these cases within bounds."

Does the Minister agree that this is a fundamental tenet of democracy and that he should be careful about tampering with it?

Mr Ford: I agree with the Member that the concept of trial by jury has been recognised by the report as a fundamental tenet, and if that is a tenet of our justice system, I have no intention of interfering with it. I will be interested to see whether others have comments to make during the next three months.

Mr Eastwood: I, too, welcome the report. Does the Minister agree that the welfare of children is paramount in our society — I am sure that he does — and that the burden of costs should not be prohibitive and a consideration in ensuring that children get access to justice?

Mr Ford: I agree entirely that the welfare of children is a very serious issue that at times has to be addressed by the justice system. However, when we look at alternative methods of dealing with family and children's cases, the issue for me is one not just of cost but

of what is the most satisfactory resolution to sometimes extremely difficult family problems.

From my professional background, I see little evidence that an adversarial court system is necessarily the best way in which to promote the long-term interests of a child who, for example, may have to get on with both parents in the future. That is why I believe that there are significant benefits from some of the ADR proposals in the report as an alternative to adversarial court systems. However, there will be occasions when it will clearly be necessary for people to resort to courts. Indeed, I know that, in certain circumstances at the moment, judges require people to seek a degree of mediation about things such as arrangements for children's welfare in divorce cases. It is a matter of ensuring that we find the best way of meeting the needs of children, rather than seeking any particular legal form of that.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the commissioning of the report by the Minister and the substantive and comprehensive report that has been brought forward by its authors. Given that the report appears to consider a fixed means test for eligibility for civil legal aid, is there a concern that that might reduce, rather than increase, fair access to justice?

Mr Ford: I thank the Member for his question. There is a danger that if we apply a fixed means test that is too low there could be the issue of reducing access. If you look at the work that the Department has done over the past year in dealing with the means test issue for non-molestation orders, you will see that is not the way that we have been seeking to operate. We will seek to ensure that any means test is applied at a suitable level. However, it is also the case that, at times, people who could afford to fund their legal cases benefit from legal aid arrangements. We need to strike the right balance while ensuring that we get access to justice for the most needy in our society.

Mr Copeland: I also join in the congratulations that have been flowing towards the Minister. I particularly welcome the aspects of the report that deal with family law. As many of us know, it is an area that is sodden with tears and, on occasions, poisoned with venom. Will the Minister, in so far as he can, undertake to establish and identify those cases in which law is used as an impediment to justice and where, in the event of a breakdown, one partner

who has access to legal aid vigorously pursues the other partner who does not, almost to the point of bankruptcy? That matter has important relevance to these proceedings.

Mr Ford: I thank the Member. I think that he is possibly the first one to congratulate the Minister, as opposed to Jim Daniell and the team, so I will take that as a compliment; thank you very much.

However, he raises a serious point and one that I know he and other Members will have heard about, as I have, which is the issue of family disputes where one partner is entitled to legal aid and the other is not — perhaps somebody with fairly modest means, but who falls just outside the scope of legal aid — and the difficulties that arise with multiple court applications. Those issues need to be addressed as an abuse of process, and they do nothing for the welfare of an ex-partner or children. We need to cover those issues to ensure that we get the best possible resolution and that we deal with those multiple applications. There are references to it in the report, and I have no doubt that Mr Copeland and others will comment on it during the consultation period.

Mr Dallat: In these times of austerity, it is right and proper that we should discuss how we save money. I am sure that the Minister will agree that the court system still has all the trappings of bygone days when money was plentiful and men wore gowns and wigs. What plans does he have to dispense with those kinds of practices and bring the court system into the real world where the ordinary working-class people, who frequent it largely, can identify with it?

Mr Ford: Even by the standards of creativity that apply in the Chamber, that was a fairly good one. To the best of my knowledge, no part of the legal aid budget funds the purchase of gowns or wigs, save in so far as the recipients of fees through the legal aid system may choose to buy their own. Perhaps Mr Maginness, who is chortling to the side, could advise his colleague on his personal practice in such respects.

However, if Mr Dallat is making a valid point about the issue of access to justice and the courts being seen to be accessible and places where normal people do not feel intimidated by an atmosphere of wigs and gowns, then I agree with him. I welcome the fact that there have been moves in that direction in recent

years. However, it lies with the judiciary and the professional practices of solicitors and barristers to work through at various levels as to how they choose to present themselves in court, rather than being anything that the Minister should interfere in any more than I have done already.

Mr Allister: I declare an interest, of course, as a member of the Northern Ireland Bar. I regret that Mr Dallat would deny the follicularly challenged of us the option of having some head covering, but there it is.

There are so many things in the report, some of which one can empathise and agree with and others about which one would have very severe reservations. The report is entitled 'Access to Justice Review Northern Ireland', but my concern is that some proposals within it will, in fact, deliver the very opposite and diminish access to justice. On the specifics of civil legal aid, for example, the proposition that the equity that someone holds in their house should become a capital consideration — *[Interruption.]*

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

Mr Allister: I am sure that you heard the exhortations to that effect. That the capital —

Mr Speaker: Order. I insist that the Member come to his question. The Member will know that I have given a number of Members quite a bit of latitude this morning. Standing Orders are clear that there should be one question to a ministerial statement. However, because of the nature of this morning's statement, I have been prepared to give Members some latitude in coming to their question.

Mr Allister: Of course, you have allowed one Member two questions, and you have not yet allowed me one, yet it might be thought that I might know something about this subject.

With regard to civil legal aid, an imposition is placed on people who might be asset rich, in the sense that they have a house, but cash poor. How can taking into account the fact of house ownership and the value of that house ever help access to justice? Will that not, as one specific, diminish access to justice? Will going down the road of the American system of no win, no fee not increase damages, as lawyers walk away with 30% and 40% of the damages awarded, rather than save money?

Mr Ford: Despite the remarks about those follicularly challenged people entitled to wear wigs in court and the fact that I, as one appearing in the witness box, has never been able to do so, Mr Allister raises a significant point about the no win, no fee proposals, which the report recognises. There are significant issues within which checks and balances would be required, but no doubt he and others will wish to comment on that specific proposal as one way of looking forward. Similarly, specific issues, such as the sorts of amounts of capital that are taken into account and whether they include such things as equity in housing, will require detailed consideration. I do not think that it is something that we will resolve here this morning. It is an issue that needs to be followed through, because Mr Allister makes what some people will see as a valid point and others will see as a plea on behalf of those who have capital.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement. The Minister mentioned alternative dispute resolution. In his statement, he referred specifically to community-based alternative dispute resolution and its use in family circumstances. Not all civil disputes outside of family disputes lend themselves to community-based solutions. What action will the Minister take to encourage the development of alternative dispute resolutions in other areas of civil law?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Weir for that point. It is clear that a variety of issues come under the general term of alternative dispute resolution, some of which are community-based, as he highlighted, and others that, I suspect, may well provide openings for those with legal qualifications. Some of those who are involved in arbitration, for example, have specific legal backgrounds that would be of benefit in that regard. We are looking at a range of issues. Family matters are dear to my heart because of my background. I also think that a number of minor business disputes, for example, might fit into some form of slightly more formal but still alternative process. One of the key issues is to ensure that we find alternative methods that do not necessarily shut off the option of going to court, if necessary, as a last resort. They should, however, incentivise the reaching of an agreement, rather than incentivising the maximum level of disagreement, as sometimes happens in an adversarial system.

Mr Wells: Could the Minister survive on £680,000 a year? A barrister who appeared before the

Justice Committee complained that he would have to survive on that as a result of the Minister's savage cuts. My heart bleeds for him. There is a lot of concern about the fact that legal aid expenditure has increased by 38% in a single financial year, as the Daniell report indicates. Surely we need to put a cap on the amount that any individual senior counsel can earn. Let us put it at, say, £300,000 — they could survive on that.

Secondly, is it not time for the Minister to state what each senior counsel is given and how much money they have got from legal aid over the past five years?

11.45 am

Mr Ford: I am not sure how many questions were in that one, Mr Speaker.

I should make it clear to Mr Wells that the specific reference to a 38% increase in costs was specifically in relation to legal aid in the Magistrate's Courts in the past financial year. As a member of the Committee, Mr Wells will know that he has played his part in reducing Crown Court costs in the past while.

I am not sure whether there are any means by which the Department of Justice could cap the total amount paid to barristers in any one year, even if it should do so. I suspect that the issue has to be to ensure that there is value for money in the time spent by lawyers who are paid from the public purse for the work that they seek to do.

I shall ignore his first question about what salary I could live on, but I think the Member knows that Ministers are paid somewhat less than the figure he quoted.

There are serious issues here. We need to recognise that for many solicitors and barristers, particularly solicitors, in current circumstances and in areas of work such as conveyancing, there are relatively low earnings compared to a few years ago. Not all barristers and solicitors are earning £600,000 a year, or whatever it is. The only issue that I am concerned about is that those paid from the public purse provide value for money and that we find the best way of getting justice for the citizen rather than the best way of putting money into the pockets of lawyers, expert witnesses or anybody else. The issue has to be access to justice for the citizens of Northern Ireland.

On-street Parking Charges

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): Mr Speaker, with your permission, I wish to make a statement on the outcome of my review of my Department's proposal to introduce on-street parking charges to towns and cities across Northern Ireland.

As Members will be aware, the proposal to roll out on-street charging to approximately 30 towns and cities across Northern Ireland was included in my Department's budget 2011-15 as part of the revenue-raising proposal by the previous Minister. The issue generated widespread debate in all parties in the lead-up to the Assembly election in May, and my party had a manifesto commitment to review the proposal. On taking up office as Minister for Regional Development, I identified this as a major issue in my Department and immediately instigated an urgent review of the proposal.

As part of my review, I have consulted widely with local public representatives, town centre traders, local chambers of commerce and the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association (NIIRTA). I want to pay particular tribute to the association and its chief executive, Mr Glyn Roberts, for providing a major contribution to the review.

I visited Comber, Cookstown, Dungannon, Enniskillen, Magherafelt and Portadown, to name but a few, to hear what local people had to say on the matter. I also received representations from traders in Carrickfergus, Kilkeel, Downpatrick, Newtownards, Bangor, Larne and Armagh. The overwhelming view across Northern Ireland was that the proposal would have a detrimental impact on towns and, more importantly, the local economy.

Having listened to viewpoints across Northern Ireland, and after careful consideration, I have decided that I will not introduce new on-street car parking charges in the proposed 30 towns and cities. I have heard a united voice in opposition to the proposals and believe that not introducing the charges is the right decision in the current economic climate.

I recognise that on-street charging can provide vital traffic management improvements in certain circumstances. Indeed, on-street charging has been operating in Belfast since 1987 and in Lisburn and Newry since 2008. I am, of course, familiar with the scheme in Newry, which has

brought significant improvement to traffic flows and access to retail and tourist attractions in the city. I am always open to requests to introduce on-street charging from traders and local councils in any town or city where they anticipate traffic management or commercial benefits. A lot of work has taken place in Londonderry, and that might be a location where traders want to discuss further the introduction of on-street charging and the benefits that it can bring to city centre business.

As I highlighted earlier, this proposal is included in my Department's budget. I therefore have to find approximately £8.8 million from other areas over the Budget period to make up the projected revenue lost from on-street parking. Given the pressures in all areas of my budget, it is a difficult task. However, I am determined to minimise, as far as possible, the impact on front line services in my Department. I therefore propose to offset the £8.8 million shortfall with the following savings: £2 million from greater efficiency in my Department; a £2 million reduction in Roads Service's operational expenditure; £2.1 million income from off-street parking charges in provincial towns and on-street charges in some cities, which is a change and a correction to the statement that Members have before them, and I apologise for that, but for the sums to add up I needed to make that amendment and I stand humbly before the House; and a £2.7 million reduction in the subsidy paid to Translink, which I do not expect to lead directly to any increase in fares.

Let me explain each of those areas in more detail. It is important when we make changes to give a full explanation; I am not a Minister who makes an announcement and then people cannot understand how it is paid for. My 2011-15 budget also includes proposals to carry out a series of reviews of off-street car park charges and existing on-street parking charges. In the majority of cases, those tariffs have remained unchanged for 12 years and have fallen well behind rates charged in private car parks. Let me reassure Members that there is no profit in car-parking charges. The money received from parking charges and penalty charges on drivers who park illegally goes towards the costs of providing parking services, which include: the cost of traffic attendants; the management and maintenance of all car parks; the collection and banking of cash; the provision of lines and signs; departmental staff costs; and capital depreciation of car parks. In 2010-11, it cost

£22 million to run those services, whereas income from parking charges and penalties was in the region of £15 million. That means that it costs my Department approximately £7 million a year to operate parking services. Going forward, I want to work towards my Department's parking services becoming self-funding.

Some months ago, Translink was notified by my Department of the levels of revenue support that it can expect over the Budget period. As a result, it has been able to bring forward developed financial plans for the next few years which balance the need for it to operate profitably with the need to maintain an overall public transport network. For this year, Translink has, to date, been able to operate without increasing fares, but such an approach requires it to operate as cost-effectively as possible and it is necessary to sometimes review the frequency and use of services in those circumstances. In the present economic climate, avoiding fare increases for as long as possible is important and contrasts with the situation in other parts of the British Isles. Part of the thinking is that an approach that minimises fare increases stands the best chance of growing the numbers of fare-paying passengers who use public transport. Combined with measures to prioritise public transport, such as the Belfast on the Move initiative, I hope that Translink can generate more funding for itself, rather than overly rely on public subsidy or reimbursement.

Currently, Translink receives some £70 million in funding from my Department. That covers direct subsidy to the railways, reimbursement of concessionary fares and fuel duty rebate for bus services. That level of support is expected to be maintained next year before it drops materially in 2013-14 and 2014-15. Nevertheless, I believe that it is necessary to reduce the level of Translink subsidy by a further £1.3 million in 2013-14 and £1.4 million in 2014-15 because I expect that it can grow numbers of fare-paying passengers and resulting income in the interim.

I emphasise that I hope to protect the levels of subsidy being provided to rail users, given the plan to introduce new trains on to the network. I do not intend that that additional saving will impact on fare levels, and I will look closely at that area as I agree Translink's financial plan. I appreciate that some people may not be happy with a slight decrease in funding for public transport. However, given the tight budget that I inherited and the potential for Translink

to generate additional income, I believe that the change can be managed internally without impacting front line services.

Turning now to the efficiencies in the Department, the spending and savings proposals in its 2010 budget set out spending plans on the basis of a flat admin budget across the four years of the Budget period. The Department has initiated plans to live within that allocation by absorbing pay increases and other pressures within its admin budget. That involves using natural wastage efficiencies created by people leaving the organisation due to age retirement and other reasons. It also involves an ongoing programme of organisational reviews that will look at efficiencies in the use of staff and general administrative expenditure.

My revised plan identifies a further £1 million in efficiencies from the Department for Regional Development (DRD) staffing budget in years three and four of the Budget period, which are 2013-14 and 2014-15. Those new pressures will also be addressed through organisational efficiencies and natural wastage opportunities.

My Department will use established procedures for dealing with any staff surpluses that arise, including redeployment to other duties within either DRD or other Departments. I wish to make it clear that there are no plans for staff redundancies. My Department will consult fully with trade unions and staff as appropriate in taking forward proposals for the efficiencies that are required to live within budget.

Finally, Roads Service will make its £2 million reduction in operational expenditure through savings on repairing low-category carriageway defects that have not yet become hazardous and that will now have low impact on the public.

I believe that today's announcement about not rolling out new on-street parking charges demonstrates how a local Minister listens to the views of local people and delivers outcomes that reflect their needs. I also believe that it will help local businesses in what is a challenging time economically across Northern Ireland, and I am pleased that I have been able to deliver on a commitment that my party gave during the recent election campaign.

I hope that Members and traders across Northern Ireland will welcome the decision that I have taken today. I commend the statement to the House.

Mr Spratt (The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): I thank the Minister for his statement and, indeed, for briefing me and the Deputy Chairperson yesterday. It is disappointing that we will see a 100% increase in off-street car parking fees over the next two or three years. Although there is an argument that Belfast should not be the only place to feel the pain, it is equally true that Belfast enjoys a greater public transport provision, unlike towns in rural areas where the inadequate transport structure necessitates bringing cars into towns. That will therefore adversely impact on rural dwellers. I also note from the Roads Service website that there are approximately 76 DRD car parks throughout Northern Ireland, with about 15,600 spaces, where no tariffs are charged at all. Perhaps spreading the load would have been better.

12.00 noon

Will the Minister assure the House that the increased charges, coupled with the reductions in rural bus services, will not be detrimental to our most vulnerable citizens, such as the elderly, those with a disability, young people, rural dwellers and, indeed, the unemployed? Will the Minister also advise whether any thought has been given to the disposal of excess land assets that are currently held by the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Chair of the Committee for Regional Development for his questions. I am sorry that he did not feel it possible to welcome the announcement that gives huge relief, I believe, to many traders in a great many towns in Northern Ireland. However, I understand his points of concern.

First, let me say that there will be no additional increases to tariffs in Belfast as a result of today's announcement. Even after tariffs are increased in line with the existing budget proposal, Belfast charges for either on-street or off-street parking will still be much lower than many private sector car parks. On average, all urban and rural areas will increase by a similar percentage. I understand the Member's points on the impact that any increase will have, particularly on those who are most vulnerable, and I know that Translink also has to bear that consideration in mind. I am in discussion and am reflecting with Translink and the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company about the assets currently held by the holding company

and how we could move forward on an issue such as that.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. Indeed, a lot of traders in my constituency from Newcastle and Kilkeel would also welcome the statement.

Will the Minister give a commitment to work with local government and chambers of commerce, particularly in the towns that were considered for charging, to develop traffic management plans? I am thinking of Newcastle in particular, where there are seasonal pressures with the high number of tourists visiting the town. Obviously, parking is a problem at certain periods of the year.

Mr Speaker: The Member should come to his question.

Mr W Clarke: Will the Minister give that commitment?

Mr Kennedy: I genuinely thank the Member for congratulating me on the announcement, which overturns the earlier decision of his party colleague, the previous Minister. I really am beginning to feel loved and cherished, but with some way to go from other people.

I am happy to give an assurance that my Department and Roads Service will work with chambers of commerce and other local authority people to ensure that traffic management plans are sensible and well designed for towns and, indeed, cities across Northern Ireland.

Mr Nesbitt: Yesterday, I heard an Executive Minister announce the need to save £22 million from his departmental budget with no indication of how he intended to do it. Today, I hear another Executive Minister announce the need to find £8.8 million and explain in great detail how he intends to do it. Does the Minister have an opinion on which one is the better form of government?

Mr Kennedy: I am very grateful to the Member for his question. I can claim, with some modest success, that I have not only brought forward a change but have explained that change in some detail to the House in an open and transparent way. I much prefer to leave others to judge how that is reflected upon.

Mr Byrne: Again at the risk of love calling the Minister, I very much welcome the statement.

I think that it is a very good statement on the three issues relating to on-street car parking charges. It is a welcome boost, particularly for retailers in provincial towns who were concerned about the damage that on-street car parking charges would cause.

The Minister outlined some efficiencies, which I welcome, to fund the decision not to bring in the charges. Will he give serious consideration to a comprehensive review of how car park attendants operate in Northern Ireland? There is a serious concern that they are damaging business in many provincial towns. Let us review the actual cost of the traffic warden system in Northern Ireland.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for welcoming the proposals and changes that we have made. I know that there is concern in some quarters about the role of the system operators. However, we all have to realise that their job is an enormously difficult, challenging and unpopular one, almost akin to being a Minister or, indeed, a Member of the House. I am prepared to look at ways in which we can move forward. As outlined in my statement, collecting the money and managing the car parks and the attendant staffing issues cost my Department year by year. I hope that, at some stage, we can move to equalise the situation so that it does not cost the taxpayer ongoing sums of money. Traffic wardens and attendants do a difficult job and, largely, they do so professionally. However, I will look at the issue.

Mr Dickson: I welcome the statement, particularly because it appears to be a U-turn from where the Assembly was previously and because traders from Larne and Carrickfergus, which are in my constituency, were fearful about the effect that the charges would have on their trade during these difficult recessionary times.

I turn directly to the savings that you propose to make, Minister. I seek an absolute assurance that the reduction in Roads Service operational expenditure will not affect road safety in Northern Ireland, which is of vital importance.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for welcoming the announcement. Having had representations from people in many towns and, indeed, from public representatives and chambers of trade and commerce, I know the strength of feeling out there and the pressure that many of our small and indigenous retailers are feeling at this time. It is good that we can

lift some of that burden. This is not a panacea for all their ills, and I am not promoting it as such. It is, however, an important acceptance of the problems that small retailers face; in particular, their competition with multinationals that operate in shopping centres with free parking and other facilities. I think that it will help to level the playing field to an extent and hope that it is welcomed.

Safety on the roads and in all of the areas for which I have responsibility remains a key priority. Even in challenging economic times, safety will always be a key priority.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the Minister's decision. I sat on the former Regional Development Committee, and when the original decision was announced, I opposed it. Therefore, I welcome the Minister's common sense decision to reverse the proposal to introduce on-street parking charges. In the statement, the Minister refers to a new figure of, I think, £2.1 million of income that he intends to find from off-street parking charges. As the Minister will be aware, in my constituency, there is currently free parking in Cookstown's town centre. Can he confirm whether that will continue or whether it forms part of his proposal to introduce charging in certain car parks?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for welcoming the broad thrust of the proposals. We will have to reflect on certain changes. Essentially, he is asking about new charges for car parks where it is currently free to park. I can confirm that the current proposal to increase existing tariffs includes the introduction of charging to 28 car parks where parking is free. Those charges will be introduced in the near future. My announcement of new on-street parking charges does not apply to those off-street car parks. The introduction of further charging in off-street car parks that are currently free will be considered routinely in my Department's annual tariff reviews.

I visited Cookstown to hear representations, not only from elected representatives but from the local business community. I will confirm for the Member as quickly as possible the up-to-date situation for Cookstown.

Mr Lyttle: I note the Minister and his party colleague's criticism of other Ministers' financial forecasting while waxing lyrical about the success of their own. However, I also note that the protection of the subsidy for rail users in the

next year is one that is based on "hope" and that the reduction to public transport funding for 2013-14 is based on "expectation". I am not sure where those foundations are set.

The Minister forecasted correctly objection to his cut in public transport funding. I seek his assurance that that reduction will in no way delay the introduction and operation of the recently and expensively purchased modern train fleet?

Mr Kennedy: I pay tribute to the Member for his valiant defence of his party colleague on the Executive. *[Laughter.]*

The cut will not impede the purchase of new trains at all. The new trains have been a real success — no pun intended. *[Laughter.]* What has been heartening about the upgrading of rail services throughout Northern Ireland has been the fact that it has led to greater train usage. That is a very good thing indeed. It is part of the argument and debate that we had yesterday on the Londonderry to Coleraine line. We want to bring about a positive outcome to all those issues.

Mr Allister: Mr Speaker, it may be a first, but I want to welcome the ministerial statement on the reprieve that has been granted to towns that are faced with the threat of on-street car parking charges, particularly Ballymena and Ballymoney. With regard to pain, the Minister referred to the fact that 28 car parks will now come into the charging regime. Can he, by writing or otherwise, identify any of those car parks that are located in my constituency, North Antrim?

Can he also explain why DRD car parks seem to run at such a loss whereas private car parks, where the charging regime is not that different, are very profitable operations? Does that not suggest inefficiency in the running of departmental car parks?

Mr Kennedy: I am flattered in the extreme that the Member has found it in his heart to welcome my ministerial statement. The entire House can share in my unrelenting joy in celebration of the enormity of the statement that the Member has made. *[Laughter.]*

I will provide the House and the Library with details of the 28 car parks that have been mentioned. The Member refers to the difference between private car parks and those that are operated by my Department. Realistically, anyone who parks in Belfast city centre to facilitate either

work or shopping sees a significant difference between some of the private car parks and the DRD ones.

12.15 pm

I have already said that this whole operation costs my Department £7 million, and we need to move to a situation where there is no cost to the Department. How do we do that? Is it simply about increasing charges — clearly not — or is it about getting greater efficiency from staff and resources?

Mr Storey: I welcome the Minister's statement. I want to press him further on the issue of the 28 car parks. Despite what his colleague from Strangford said about the detail, it is unfortunate that he had to inform the House that he will place in the Library the information that affects 28 car parks that are currently free. In my constituency, Townhead Street car park in Ballymoney is a vital facility for trade in the town. Will the Minister undertake to provide not only a list of the 28 car parks, but the rationale for choosing them?

Mr Kennedy: I am happy to respond to the Member directly on the issue that he has raised.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I join my colleague Jim Allister in welcoming the Minister's statement — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Doherty: I also thank the Minister for the briefing that he gave me and the Chairperson of the Committee yesterday. On the savings that you are going to make, you say that there will be a £2 million reduction in Roads Service's operational expenditure. You talk about low category carriageway defects. Will you give some explanation about the criteria for determining such defects? Is there not a danger that those repairs will become more costly — I have a pun here — further down the road?

Mr Kennedy: I had not realised that my powers of mediation were so extensive. *[Laughter.]* I feel that I am drifting into territory currently owned by David Latimer. There may well be views on that.

Going back to the point raised by Mr Dickson about road safety and carriageway safety, there are relatively routine minor carriageway defects that can be improved on a more systematic

and ongoing basis instead of sending people out to do a particular patching job when it is not absolutely essential. All of these things are carefully assessed on the basis of safety, and that will continue to be the case.

Mr Beggs: I too welcome the Minister's statement and his decision to abandon the proposals of the previous Minister and those that were contained in the budget for on-street car parking charges.

Is the Minister content that the proposals will be supported by NIIRTA? Will he confirm that both the Larne traders and members of Carrickfergus Chamber of Commerce are agreed on the dangers of this form of charging, so that we will not be endangering our town centres, which are obviously in great competition with out-of-town shopping?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his encouraging remarks, which were completely unscripted. I assure him that NIIRTA is completely behind and understands the detail of the announcement that I made today. I hope very much that it will be able to welcome the proposals and join the growing band of people who have done so. The towns that he mentioned, Larne and Carrickfergus, through their Chambers of Commerce, their traders and public representatives, have sent the consistent and unanimous message that on-street car parking charges are a burden too much. They are an unfair burden in a highly competitive area and in the current challenging economic circumstances. My announcement today will find a broad welcome throughout towns and cities all over Northern Ireland.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement; however, I recognise that some devil in the detail has yet to be declared about car parks. Minister, will you assure the House that there will be no further diminution of the timetabling and scheduling of Ulsterbus and the other services that are operated by Translink?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for her positive comments. In the operational decisions that are taken by Translink, every effort is made to take account of local circumstances and other issues such as value for money, and it will continue to consider those issues. I have an obvious interest in that area and I will also want to be assured that it is doing so.

Lord Morrow: I am more concerned with what the Minister has not said today. What he did say seems all right, and it was well scripted by the civil servants who know how to draft these things. I am also concerned that, in one of his replies, he said that he would place the information that was requested in the Assembly Library. We are all looking forward to seeing that.

How does the Minister draw a comparison between two towns of a similar size such as Dungannon and Cookstown? People must pay for car parking in Dungannon, but if they travel 10 miles down the road they do not have to pay for it. Does he accept that that places the retail trade on an unequal footing and an unlevel playing field? Should there not be a level playing field when it comes to parking, with all towns either charging or not charging?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. With his characteristic directness, he did not quite rain on the parade, but he certainly brought forward his direct approach. However, it would have been too much to expect Lord Morrow to join in with the celebratory mood.

The point that he raised is actually a fair one. There are anomalies in the systems that have existed over a long period, and it will take considerable work to equalise those. I am happy to look at particular issues in particular areas, and I will readily do so. Although I have been in my post for a relatively short period of time, I accept that I have inherited a system in which anomalies exist around equity.

Mr Copeland: I also join in with the throng who welcomed the statement. Does the Minister recognise that one of the implications that flowed from this issue was the recent withdrawal of a number of bus services in east Belfast, which were, in effect, subsidised by retail and other business interests? In one particular case, the provision of the bus service was a condition of the planning permission, yet, after the planning permission was granted, the developer in question was declared bankrupt. When approaching these matters in the future, might it be an idea to insist that the developer should pay a bond to provide for the subvention of the bus service for an agreed period? That will mean that such arrangements actually bring forward the benefits in reality that they promise on paper.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. He raised a couple of issues. The first issue was a

general principle about how we approach such things and the second dealt with a more specific case. I am happy to receive further information or correspondence from him, and I will seek to address the points that he raised.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

The sitting was suspended at 12.26 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Microenergy

1. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline her plans to support microenergy generation. (AQO 279/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Microgenerators of electricity are incentivised under the Northern Ireland renewables obligation (NIRO), which is the main mechanism for supporting renewable electricity generation in Northern Ireland. Approximately 90% of those receiving support are microgenerators. In 2010, I increased the incentive level for new microgenerators using wind, hydro and solar photovoltaic technologies. In addition, in July this year I launched a consultation on a £25 million renewable heat incentive, which recommends support for generators, including microgenerators, to install renewable heat technologies over the next four years.

Mr McCallister: Why did Northern Ireland not embrace the feed-in tariff and renewable heat incentive when the low-carbon buildings programme ended, as England, Scotland and Wales did?

Mrs Foster: I have indicated to the House on many occasions that we did not have the authority to embrace the feed-in tariff (FIT) because we did not have the legislative capability. It came about in England and Wales through a change that came at a late stage to the Bill that was going through the House of Lords. It, therefore, did not include Northern Ireland, and we could not bring it in to Northern Ireland at that time. I did, however, ask officials to look at whether the feed-in tariff would be better for Northern Ireland than what we have currently, namely the Northern Ireland renewables obligation.

The cost of the NIRO is spread right across the UK, so the FIT would, more likely than not, apply just to Northern Ireland. In other words, the cost would just be spread across consumers in Northern Ireland. That would mean that it would cost more to implement the FIT for consumers here in Northern Ireland. I did not think that that was a road that we would want to go down, given the context of where we are on energy. However, as the Member will probably know, electricity market reform is very much on the agenda of the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC). Officials are working with DECC to ensure that Northern Ireland gets the proper incentivisation model moving forward. So this is an area of flux, and we very much need to be in the middle of it with DECC to make sure that Northern Ireland's voice is heard.

Mr A Maginness: I am very interested in the Minister's answer to Mr McCallister. Is the Minister indicating that her preference for microgeneration would be to have a feed-in tariff sometime in the future? As the Minister probably knows, it has been very successful in other jurisdictions. Given the paper that DECC produced recently, it might be the way forward for Northern Ireland.

Mrs Foster: As the Chair of the Committee knows, we looked at the issue in the previous mandate when he and his Committee carried out its work on energy. As I indicated then, we did not have the legislative authority, but we did some work. We very much wanted to look at the FIT as a possibility. We were not going to close our minds to it, because it is happening in the rest of the United Kingdom and, indeed, in the Republic of Ireland. However, I am concerned that the costs associated with introducing and administering a FIT could increase the cost to electricity consumers.

I know that, in all the things that relate to energy, we have to balance competing goals and look at sustainability and competitiveness. We also have to look at the cost to consumers, which is always part of the mix when I look at these matters. However, matters have moved on since the debate that we had last year about having a FIT just for Northern Ireland. Electricity market reform indicates the end of the renewables obligation in the United Kingdom in 2017, and, therefore, we will probably have to look at a new mechanism. We are discussing what that new mechanism will be, and I am sure that the Committee will be very much involved in that.

Mr Dunne: Is the Minister aware of difficulties around connecting to the NIE grid system? What pressure can the Minister put on NIE and the Utility Regulator to make such connections more streamlined and cost-effective?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. This issue comes up from time to time among people who are trying to manage wind generation and find they are having difficulties not just with that wind generation but with the new anaerobic digestion. People can have difficulties getting a price indication from NIE, and there can be a delay with the grid connection.

As the Member probably knows, NIE operates under a regulatory framework determined by the Utility Regulator as detailed in its licence from him. It is required under that licence to provide a connection offer to all generation connecting into the distribution system in line with its connection charging statement. I think part of the difficulty is that the price indication is given at the end of the planning process, so it does not happen concurrently but consecutively. That causes some delay. However, I understand that NIE has recognised that it needs to have adequate resources in place to meet the increasing number of connection requests.

To me, an increasing number of connection requests indicates that more and more people are availing themselves of a mix of renewable energies. I understand that NIE is recruiting staff to deal with connections as well as recruiting managerial and administrative staff. I hope that we will see a more streamlined version of what is happening and has been happening over the past number of years. If we are to have the amount of renewables that we have targeted for ourselves, we need to get those renewables connected to the grid.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In light of Community Energy Scotland's experience, what plans does the Minister have to help communities install microgeneration technologies to help achieve the renewable energy target for 2020?

Mrs Foster: I am not aware of the detail of the Member's question about Scotland, but I am happy to take some information from him. I had an interesting exchange recently with some members of the Fermanagh Trust about community benefits from wind farms. I have asked officials to look at that issue because

we know that, in some cases, companies bring a great deal of community benefit to areas where wind farms are hosted. I hope that other companies do the same. Huge investment has been made in wind farms, and communities should benefit from that. I am aware, given that conversation, that some areas of the United Kingdom seem to benefit a great deal more than some of the host communities here in Northern Ireland, and I have asked officials to look at that.

Golf

2. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what actions her Department has taken, and intends to take, to promote Northern Ireland as a venue for international golf tournaments.
(AQO 280/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The recent successes of Graeme — I had better get his name right — McDo'ell or McDow-ell — I always get it wrong; I think I will call him G-Mac — Rory McIlroy and Darren Clarke offer us an unprecedented opportunity to promote Northern Ireland as the home of golf. I have, therefore, asked the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to work with key stakeholders to explore the possibility of holding a major golf event in Northern Ireland. We have been investigating the feasibility of securing the Irish Open in the next few years and aspire to holding the Open Championship sometime thereafter.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for her answer so far. Can she give us some assurance that the tourism marketing strategies will include golf and, in particular, the resource available on the north-east coastline?

Mrs Foster: All politics is local, but golf is the world's largest sports-related travel market, and therefore it is incumbent on all tourism partners to put golf right at the top of their agenda. I take this opportunity to congratulate our Walker Cup golfers Paul Cutler and Alan Dunbar. Yet again, two Northern Ireland golfers have represented GB and Northern Ireland and have done us proud. That is another indication of the importance of golf here.

We are rolling out a golf tourism campaign of £1.8 million to invite potential holidaymakers to come and visit the home of the champions. That campaign builds on an already busy schedule of year-round golf promotions. The Northern Ireland

Tourist Board, as I have said, has big plans for the future, but it has already supported golf events in the past, including the Senior British Open and the Ladies Irish Open, and, as some of you may know, we are working with the Galgorm Castle Golf Club. I was hosted there for the second successive year in July. That is a hugely successful event, which gains coverage on the Sky television network. It portrays Northern Ireland right across the world, and golf remains very much at the heart of what I do in tourism.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I do not know whether the Minister will be delighted that I am not resorting to a parochial issue today. Given the huge number of people who have travelled to New Zealand for the rugby World Cup, has the Minister had or does she plan to have any discussions with ministerial colleagues, either in the Executive or the Dublin Government, about the possibility of the rugby World Cup coming to this island at some stage?

Mrs Foster: As an Ulster rugby fan, I would be more than delighted to see the rugby World Cup come to the British Isles, which would probably be a more realistic thing to hope for. I will give all my support to that. We have a huge number of events coming up in 2012 and 2013, one of which is, of course, the World Police and Fire Games. That gives us a really good opportunity to promote Northern Ireland and all that we have to offer in sporting tourism. It certainly forms part of the package that I want to promote.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Mike Nesbitt, who might return to golf perhaps.

Mr Nesbitt: You are very wise, Mr Deputy Speaker. Does the Minister agree that the potential for achieving the Tourist Board's goals for more tourists spending more per day and staying for longer lies not so much in the glamour of a four-day golf event but in the more mundane, day-to-day attraction of golfers who are here to play, rather than to watch?

Mrs Foster: I think it is both, actually. The Member is right to say that we want to attract more golf tourists to Northern Ireland, but the publicity that we will generate by holding major tournaments here will help us to do that. One of the reasons for the Home of Champions campaign that we have been running is to attract golf tourists to Northern Ireland to play the courses where our brilliant champions come from. That is proving very successful.

The Member is right about our tourism spend figures. We all know that golf tourists spend considerably more than ordinary leisure tourists, and, therefore, if we are to ensure that we reach those targets in the emerging tourism strategy, we need more golf tourists and more spending of their money in our villages and towns right across Northern Ireland.

Electricity Prices

3. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions she had with Power NI prior to the recent rise in electricity prices; and what consideration has been given to reviewing energy management structures. (AQO 281/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I have not met Power NI, but there have been a number of meetings over the summer between my officials, Power NI, the Utility Regulator and the Consumer Council as part of the annual electricity tariff review process. The Power NI price increase of 18.6% is, of course, disappointing and is challenging for both businesses and domestic consumers, especially in the current difficult economic climate. However, the price increase is largely due to rises in the wholesale cost of generation fuels, resulting in increased power generation costs, which lead to higher electricity charges. The increase in electricity tariffs has been scrutinised and approved by the Utility Regulator, who has the responsibility for regulating Power NI tariffs.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin, agus tá ceist agam di ar an ábhar chéanna.

Has the Minister's Department assessed the effect of greater competition, and is that providing any benefit to the consumer?

2.15 pm

Mrs Foster: Of course, we want to see more competition in the Northern Ireland electricity market. As the Member will know, Airtricity came into the market in June 2010 and provided a 14% reduction on NIE's — now Power NI's — prices. We are trying to encourage other companies to come in. The Member may have heard the Electricity Supply Board's (ESB) recent announcements about its intention to come into the Northern Ireland market. Other companies want to come in, and the more that do, the more

competitive prices will become. We have already seen that with just two players in the market. It is part of the wider European strategy to have an integrated market, not just between us and the Republic of Ireland but across the British Isles and in France. If we have a much broader regulated market, we will see more competition, and we will see the benefit of that in prices as well.

Mr Campbell: Further to the issue of competitiveness, will the Minister join me in expressing surprise that, setting aside the names and backgrounds of the companies involved, although there is a cheaper product available, more people have not taken advantage of the competitiveness of the market? That is a good thing, and because there is no yellow pack electricity, the product is identical and people can get it more cheaply than they could otherwise at a time of rising prices. We should encourage people to shop around and get a cheaper product.

Mrs Foster: That is surprising, but part of the difficulty has to do with the privatisation of NIE, which took place in 1992. A lot of people are still used to that brand, and, in many ways, the fact that NIE has now rebranded to Power NI may signal to people that there has been a change. Hopefully, people will start to look around for different price levels. It is about looking not just at electricity companies but at alternatives, such as gas. I know that the Member will join me in hoping that we are able to develop gas provision in the west, so that we give everyone in Northern Ireland the chance to have a choice of power supply and are not solely reliant on electricity.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In previous answers, the Minister mentioned the hardship that some families and businesses, particularly small businesses, face because of rising energy prices. Has she had any meetings with the Utility Regulator or, indeed, some of the energy companies? There is a view that NIE's pension fund deficit is responsible for the rise in costs and that those are not just the result of the wholesale cost of energy.

Mrs Foster: I raised the issue of the NIE pension deficit with the Utility Regulator, as the Member would expect me to do. That deficit relates to the NIE transmission and distribution business — the part that has gone to ESB.

Power NI is a separate entity, which is subject to its own price review process. The current price increase is not being implemented as a result of the reported NIE pension deficit. The Utility Regulator expects NIE to manage its pension costs within the allowance provided in the current price control, which is in effect from April 2007 until March 2012. Within that price control, NIE receives an allowance for pension contributions. The pension deficit figure is on the distribution side, not on Power NI's side.

The Member may not accept that wholesale costs have caused the increase in power prices, but there has been a huge change across the world over the past year that has had a big impact on the cost of fuel across the world. The Japanese tsunami, the developments in the Middle East and many other events have had an impact on the price of electricity. Although we will continue to work with the energy companies, the Utility Regulator and the Consumer Council, which, the Member will accept, provides a useful source of impartial advice for energy consumers, the Executive are looking at what more we can do to mitigate what will be a very difficult winter. We wholly accept that a lot of people are already in fuel poverty. Indeed, from my perspective, many small businesses also have difficulty with costs. Energy prices are becoming a huge issue for a lot of small business, so we need to address it.

Mr Kinahan: The Minister touched on the difficulty of controlling prices. What other steps is she looking at to help the large number of people who are now moving into fuel poverty?

Mrs Foster: As the Member knows, the Minister for Social Development leads on fuel poverty. Nevertheless, I met him before the summer, which was before we knew of the scale of the price rises coming our way. We are formulating a strategy, and the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have been exercised as to how we might mitigate energy prices over the winter. We will say more about that in coming weeks, and, towards the end of the month, I will say more about how we can help to mitigate energy price rises.

Mobile Phones: Roaming Charges

4. **Mr Doherty** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions her Department has had with Ofcom, the mobile

phone industry and the European Commission to secure a further reduction in roaming charges. (AQO 282/11-15)

Mrs Foster: That is not a devolved matter. However, I am in discussion with Ofcom regarding mobile phone coverage in Northern Ireland. Improving access to 3G services is one of the key themes in my Department's 2011-15 telecommunications action plan and, indeed, in our bid for funding under the broadband delivery UK initiative.

Mr Doherty: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given that excessive roaming charges are a serious barrier to growing the all-Ireland economy, what steps is she taking towards the introduction of an all-Ireland mobile phone tariff?

Mrs Foster: As the Member knows, the matter was regulated by the European Union, which introduced a regulation in 2007 — amended in 2009 — on the maximum that could be charged for roaming charges, commonly known as the Eurotariff. The European Commission set a target for the difference between national and roaming charges to approach zero by 2015. Therefore, the issue continues to exercise the European Commission.

I have made my view clear to Ofcom, the regulator on the matter, that roaming is an issue in Northern Ireland because we do not have sufficient 3G coverage and are, therefore, often sent to roaming. The fact that we do not have the 3G coverage that we should causes problems, and that comes from the fact that the United Kingdom target of 90% 3G coverage is based on population rather than geography. Therefore, if big cities are covered, population coverage targets are hit. We have been suggesting and lobbying hard for geographical targets, so that Northern Ireland has its own mobile phone coverage target. The 4G spectrum will be on the market very soon, and we hope that we can have a regional target for mobile phone coverage, which would help not only with coverage but with roaming charges.

Mr Storey: In looking at mobile phone coverage issues, will the Minister take into particular consideration areas in Northern Ireland that have absolutely no coverage and have become black spots? I am thinking in particular of one area in my constituency, Dervock, where, when you enter the village, your mobile phone reception disappears. I welcome what the Minister did on the superfast broadband for

rural communities, but will she now give an assurance that she will go back to the providers and continue to put pressure on them to deliver a service for the benefit of our constituents?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. It relates to those targets again because, unfortunately, providers will not deliver unless they are pushed to do so. I understand that the target for 4G across the UK is 95%, but that will not help people in Dervock because that target can be reached just by looking at higher-density population areas. In the telecoms action plan for the coming years, we need to push Ofcom and get that issue resolved and then see where infill solutions are needed, in the way that we have done with broadband. There is a need to do that for mobile, particularly with 4G, which will allow fast data to be processed in a way that it is not at present.

Mr P Ramsey: I follow on from Pat Doherty's question about roaming charges, which have a significant impact, particularly in cross-border regions. People living in Derry do not even have to be in Donegal to find themselves on O2 Ireland. It happens frequently to hundreds of people, who incur additional costs. Given the lack of co-operation from phone companies, particularly here, is it not time that the Minister supported a call for Ofcom to implement regulations that will, as Pat Doherty suggested, decrease roaming charges?

Mrs Foster: If the Member had listened to my response to the first question, he would have heard that that will come as part of a European solution in any event. I recognise what he said about phone coverage. I will let him and the rest of the House into a secret: when I am in Brookeborough, I am on something that I should not be on — and that is the phone. *[Laughter.]* Moving swiftly on, what I am saying is that I am on a Republic of Ireland tariff. There is a great need to have that matter sorted out and for the European Commission to deal with the issue. It is a cross-border issue, and the Commission really needs to get to grips with it. It tried to set a maximum tariff, but I fully accept the Member's point. It should be a zero tariff; there should not be any additional cost. However, that is an issue across Europe. It is not just on this island; it is a matter for the whole of Europe.

Energy Strategy

5. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether her Department plans to produce an energy strategy to help improve energy security and energy independence. (AQO 283/11-15)

Mrs Foster: A new strategic energy framework (SEF) was approved by the Executive, and I published it in September 2010. It sets out clear priorities for Northern Ireland's energy future over the next 10 years and identifies the key energy goals of building competitive markets, ensuring security of supply, enhancing sustainability and developing our energy infrastructure. The framework also confirmed new renewable energy targets of 40% renewable electricity and 10% renewable heat by 2020.

Mr Dickson: What is the Minister's assessment of the strategy to date? What areas, if any, has she already identified for improvement?

Mrs Foster: Following the publication of the strategic energy framework, work was taken forward on the development of a framework implementation plan. That is being used to track the progress against the various SEF targets and will also be used to update the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment regularly. The framework was launched in September 2010, so it is too early for a yearly adjustment or monitor, but I am sure that we will have that before the end of the year, after which we will see what progress we are making on those issues.

Since the introduction of the Northern Ireland renewables obligation for renewable electricity, we have moved from 3% to 10%. Things are moving ahead. I accept that it is a difficult context to keep pushing in that regard, particularly at a time of rising costs. As I have said previously, however, there is more than one goal in our energy policy. Sometimes, those are competing goals, and it is a matter of balancing all of them.

Environment

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 14 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

Waste: Illegal Dumping

1. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the total amount of illegal

waste dumped in Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland in the last two years; and the fines and prosecutions that his Department has imposed as a result. (AQO 294/11-15)

2.30 pm

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment):

I welcome all Members back to the House after the summer recess, and I thank the Member for his question, the answer to which will surprise him as much as it surprised me. During the past two years, only one incident of waste from the Republic of Ireland has come to the attention of the Department. I say that that might be surprising because your intuition would tell you that it might be more than that, given the history of illegal waste disposal in the North. As of now, there has been only one report. I have asked that we check with the PSNI to determine whether it is aware of any other reports, but, ultimately, it is for the community to report to the Department or the police if they are concerned about potential illegal waste being dumped in the North of Ireland. As one of my officials said to me yesterday, the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his answer. Yes, I am surprised, given the extensive amount of media coverage on the issue of illegal dumping. My perception was that there is a strong cross-border racket in that area. Is the Minister convinced that he is getting as much support as he requires from the statutory authorities on the other side of the border to help establish whether it is a minimal problem, as he has identified it, or whether there is a need for greater coverage?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I cannot go into some detail because, although matters are brought to my attention as Minister, the Northern authorities, through the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), and the Southern authorities work on enforcement, especially on criminal activity. They work together and with the Garda Síochána and the PSNI in tracking and taking action against those who may be involved in cross-border illegal waste activities. However, I am certain that the co-operation is working effectively. That is why, of the 17 sites where illegal dumping has been identified in the North, two, in Trillick and Slattinagh, have been cleared. A site in Ballymartin in County Down is currently being cleared. Those may have been

the critical sites, and, over the next five years, the other sites will be cleared at a disposal cost of 100% to the Republic of Ireland authorities. Eighty per cent of the cost of removing the offending items from the North to the Republic of Ireland will be met by the Republic of Ireland authorities and 20% will be met from our own coffers. That demonstrates that the Republic of Ireland authorities are fully engaged and fully committed to the issue and are very nearly fully funding it.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given that an element of dumping is still taking place, does the Minister intend to reimburse the local authorities, which sometimes have to fork out for the bill? It is still an issue.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. The question framed by Mr Newton was about dumping from the Republic of Ireland. If Mr Boylan has information that that practice is continuing in a major or minor way, I ask him to bring it to the attention of my Department, the NIEA, the PSNI and, indeed, the authorities in the South. As I indicated, if we, as MLAs, members of the community and citizens, have evidence, that evidence needs to be acted on. I encourage the Member to fulfil that. I do not intend to establish a precedent that, where there is illegal dumping of municipal or domestic waste that is then cleared by councils, the responsibility to reimburse councils should fall to central government. That would create a principle that is not sustainable. However, if there are issues around cross-border dumping of waste, that is a responsibility that falls to the respective Governments, North and South.

Mr Nesbitt: Has the Minister formed a view on whether the existence of three waste bodies is the best way forward?

Mr Attwood: That issue occupies my mind disproportionately at the current time, not least because the process of procurement is advancing, and we may be entering a critical phase in moving to some further developments with the three procurement groups. It preoccupies my mind disproportionately because we are talking about expenditure measured in hundreds of millions of pounds and contracts that extend over 25 years, and the responsibility for paying for those contracts falls to the ratepayers of our local councils. Clearly, given the scale of the issue and costs, any Minister should be

preoccupied with that issue. However, a decision has been taken, and the outworking of that decision continues. I have to be mindful of the contractual and legal situation that arises, but I acknowledge that, as we proceed with the procurements — if that is what emerges in terms of the affordability and deliverability of those three procurement groups — we must not lose sight of the fact that, in the waste hierarchy, recycling and reusing waste are the primary tools for dealing with municipal and domestic rubbish.

Carbon Emissions: Public Buildings

2. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions he has had with the Minister of Finance and Personnel in relation to the reduction of carbon emissions generated by the public sector estate. (AQO 295/11-15)

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before the Minister answers, I announce that question 3 has been withdrawn.

Mr Attwood: I am grateful for the question, and I am grateful that Mr McNarry will not be in the Chamber to ask his question. I should point out to the members of the Ulster Unionist Party that I mean that with all due respect.

I should confirm that the issue of the government estate does not fall to me but to the Department of Finance and Personnel. However, it is important that we fulfil our obligations and stretch ourselves when it comes to carbon reduction and emissions. That is why one of my interventions as Minister — I view myself as an interventionist Minister — was to create a cross-departmental working group to ensure that our obligations on carbon reduction and carbon capture across Departments are pushed and pursued over the coming period. That and the other interventions from my Department should allow the North of Ireland to fulfil its obligations to Europe on the reduction of carbon emissions. Indeed, as I intend to announce in the near future, I believe that the North of Ireland is well placed to push itself further to achieve higher levels of reduction in emissions than those that we are internationally obliged to reach.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his response. There are vast swathes of surplus land in public ownership. Will the Minister comment on whether Northern Ireland Water

land in particular could be better utilised for energy creation?

Mr Attwood: I want to be careful not to step on the toes of Mr Kennedy and his responsibilities for regional development and NI Water. That issue has not come on to my radar. Equally, however, I have created an interdepartmental working group to interrogate the issue of emissions reduction in government and its functions. Although NI Water clearly has a separate legal status from government, I would like to think and I anticipate that, during conversations at that interdepartmental working group, the Department for Regional Development (DRD) might come to me and express a view on behalf of NI Water on the very point that Mr Gardiner raises.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I think that we would all join in welcoming the progress here on the reduction of carbon emissions in recent years. However, has the Minister given any consideration to the reintroduction of a carbon reduction scheme, which would have played a major role in that progress and reduction?

Mr Attwood: As the Member will be aware, our obligations and a lot of the policy direction and strategy on carbon emissions emanate from the London Government. In that regard, the Member might make a good point.

I concur with him, though, that good progress has been made in recent years: compared with 1990 levels, carbon emissions have been reduced by 20%. Given that our target is to reduce 1990-level emissions by 25% by 2025, it is clear that we are on the right course to achieve those outcomes. That is why I intend, if the Executive endorse my bringing forward a climate and environment Bill, to include much more challenging emission targets in that Bill than the 25% by 2025 that we are currently obliged to fulfil.

We have to be careful because figures can disguise the full facts. However, if we compare our targets with, say, Scotland's, on the face of it we are substantially behind its potential achievement. Scotland aims for a 42% reduction on 1990-level emissions by 2025. Given the scale of the issue and the size of the North, it seems to me that we should stretch ourselves, and do so in a climate and environmental Bill, to do what Scotland has done in setting challenging emission targets.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Does he agree that, in the absence of a climate Act, our 2025 target of 25% should be seen as a minimum target? If he will indulge me, does he also agree that we need to be careful that current reductions are not due just to recessionary factors?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his questions. It is the function of all Ministers to indulge Members, so I will certainly indulge him further. Yes, that is my view: I would not declare in the Chamber that I intend to include a more challenging target in a climate Bill than that to which we are already committed unless I believed that 25% by 2025 is the least that we can achieve. The economic situation is not the least among many variables that would influence that target. However, in my view, the direction of travel confirms that 25% will be achieved. Consequently, achieving 35% and 40% is within our grasp.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí a thug sé go dtí seo. Ba mhaith liom an méid seo a fhiafraí den Aire.

Bearing in mind the outlandish views held by some previous Ministers of the Environment, will the Minister indicate his own views on global warming and climate change?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. Go raibh míle maith agat. Let me make my view clear: I do not believe that the world is flat; I do not believe that babies arrive in the mouths of storks — I checked that out with my wife *[Laughter.]* and she tends to agree with me. I also have an open mind when it comes to the age of the Giant's Causeway. However, I do not have an open mind when it comes to the weight of science in relation to climate change and global warming. People should have their views, but it is the role of Ministers to take into account best evidence and the overwhelming view of science. In my view, Ministers who disregard best evidence and the overwhelming view of science do not fulfil their ministerial responsibilities as fully as they should.

Waste Oil

4. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the facilities currently in place that are capable of disposing of waste oil. (AQO 297/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am curious about where this question will go. I was about to read the answer to Mr McNarry's question. The answer in respect of waste oil is that, under current regulation, five facilities are entitled to accept, process and store waste oil up to a limit of 10 tonnes a day.

Three of them are entitled to process the waste oil, with a limit of 29,000 tons per annum. The NIEA monitors the impact of those facilities on air and water quality. Civil amenity sites also have the capacity, under licence, to store up to a limit of 1,000 litres of waste oil. I assure the Member that the NIEA has regulatory authority for those five sites currently under regulation and the civic amenity centres that have that capacity. I am advised that the NIEA is attentive to that matter.

2.45 pm

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his response. Disposing of waste oil is very difficult, particularly for those working in the agriculture industry, which amasses a considerable amount of the product. Will the Minister detail how easy it is, or is not, to recycle the waste product?

Mr Attwood: As I said in answer to the previous question, it is my practice to rely on best scientific advice. Therefore, I will have to seek the best scientific advice from the NIEA about the appropriate waste disposal models and mechanisms. I do not deny that that is beyond my knowledge and competence. Nevertheless, if the Member has concerns about the issue, will she bring them to my attention? I am in conversation with the NIEA with regard to its monitoring, compliance and enforcement regimes to ensure that any waste disposal, whether it is tyres in a depot somewhere in the North, a waste disposal plant in the hills of the Black Mountain or the disposal of waste oil, has the right enforcement and, if necessary, more enforcements, compliance and monitoring in order to ensure that waste, especially waste that is volatile or a threat, is properly managed. I am anxious and attentive to that need.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What financial incentives are in place to encourage the production of biodiesel from waste oil?

Mr Attwood: I suggest that the Member refers the matter to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, whose remit covers the detail

to answer that question. I will bring it to her attention and ask her to reply to the Member.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister give details of the Department's waste management strategy, including any potential time frame for its delivery?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. I confirm that I am reviewing the waste management strategy for Northern Ireland. If you compare where we are with regard to waste management, recycling and reuse compared to 10 years ago, you will see the progress that has been achieved. In 2002, we had municipal waste disposal targets of around 8%. Now, depending on the council area, the positive disposal of waste at civic amenity sites is between 26% and 50%. Overall in the North, we are disposing 34% of waste at civic amenity sites in a renewable way. Given all of that, and given the scale of the advance over the past 10 years where we had 8% of renewable waste disposal and we now have 34%, it seems that we should stretch ourselves on those targets as well. I will be bringing forward proposals to encourage councils to have much more challenging targets on the domestic municipal side and the commercial side because it is within our grasp to achieve much more challenging targets.

Development: Unfinished Buildings

5. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to address the problem of unfinished buildings, particularly in coastal towns where developers have left sites in a state of dereliction. (AQO 298/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question, which, I think, is opportune and timely. Over the past number of weeks, I have been travelling around various parts of Northern Ireland visiting the councils and hearing of their experiences on such issues as local dereliction and development properties being left to go to rack and ruin. If you go to Portrush, Portstewart, parts of Derry or parts of a lot of our seaside and coastal resorts you will see evidence of growing dereliction. Members are aware of the economic situation. In fact, just this morning, we heard that property prices are lower now than they were last November, so there has been a further downturn. The profile of dereliction

in various parts of the North is a matter that needs attention.

As a consequence, I am convening a group in Portrush in the first week of October to interrogate the scale of dereliction in Portrush and Portstewart, determine what further interventions might be required by local and central government and determine what further obligations might be imposed upon developers and builders who have not let sites be developed or allowed them to be only partially developed. I am doing that in order to recognise that, given the scale of this issue in many parts of the North, there needs to be further co-ordination and intervention from all arms of government and the private sector. Out of that, I am hoping that the issue of sites in a state of dereliction might be mitigated, not least because of our challenging economic circumstances and the need to grow tourism and tourism spend.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his very detailed answer. Everywhere you go, you find eyesores of unfinished sites or buildings that are derelict for other reasons. The Minister referred to interventions. Does the Minister envisage local councils being given power to intervene and to take over sites or to dispose of sites?

Mr Attwood: Councils have certain powers in respect of sites that are in dereliction, that might be a threat to public safety, that are creating a nuisance or that otherwise need intervention. DRD and the Housing Executive have the same powers. There may be an issue about how the Housing Executive, councils and DRD are availing themselves of the full suite of powers. I am mindful that councils will be somewhat hesitant to intervene, given the scale of dereliction and the potential costs. One intervention power that I am actively considering is for a planning authority to be allowed to require the owner or occupier of derelict land, the condition of which is adversely affecting the amenity of the area, to take whatever steps to clean up the land that the authority specifies. That power already falls to the planning authorities in England, and it is the type of power that might have relevance here.

One thing is very clear. Given the scale of the issue and our economic situation, interventions need to be identified and progressed, because dereliction is going to be with us for a significant

time, stretching over a number of years, perhaps beyond the next decade. This is the right time for government to show good authority, to intervene and to maximise the response from all of those who are responsible, including developers and owners.

Mr Storey: An issue that has been prevalent since before we entered into this economic downturn and faced the dereliction to which the Member for North Belfast referred is that of management companies. Will the Minister undertake to look at that issue? There are people in all of our constituencies who are in homes that they want to keep living in, but other properties have gone under the ownership of the receiver, and the management company has collapsed. Will he look at that issue again and see what can be done to address what is now a serious problem in respect of management companies?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. I will certainly put that on the agenda for the gathering in early October that will interrogate the situation in Portrush and Portstewart, the results of which I anticipate will have application in other areas of the North where there is dereliction. Again, I am going to be somewhat cautious as to whether the legal responsibility for the conduct of management companies falls to the Department of the Environment. That is a matter that I will take advice on. However, you are right. Given the growth in apartment developments, especially in a lot of urban and coastal areas in the North of Ireland, and given that, in many instances, the management companies with responsibility for apartment developments have now walked off the pitch, gone bankrupt or whatever the situation may be, it is a matter that I will put on the agenda. Given that that meeting will be attended by representatives of other Departments, councils and other agencies, I am sure that I will get the best advice in respect of that.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister has outlined the examples in Portrush and Portstewart, and those are obviously a result of the planning process and the economic situation. Does he agree that some planning policies have led to the situation in which developments in coastal areas are very much out of character? Will he agree to look at those policies to ensure that those kinds of developments do not take place again?

Mr Attwood: The policy and legal answer to that is that the planning authorities have deemed developments that you might consider out of character to be sufficiently in character to pass the planning test. That is, if you like, the legal and technical answer. However, I agree with the sentiment behind your question. I have spoken to officials about how we are going to manage planning applications for apartments in areas where there is a litany of existing planning applications for apartments that have not been activated. It seems to me that although we may have difficulty legally and procedurally to intervene, we are just creating further problems for future years if we continue to allow planning applications for apartments to be permitted in situations in which there is a legacy and litany of existing planning applications. In one part of one city in Northern Ireland, 3,600 apartment permissions for individual units have been approved, and still we are processing a range of new applications thereafter. I agree with the sentiment behind the question, even if those planning decisions must have been consistent with the law, planning practice and planning guidance.

I have to say that, when it comes to the Planning Service, although some useful progress was made over the previous mandate, I will leave no stone unturned in identifying how we can use the planning system to achieve best outcomes, especially best outcomes with economic benefit. I will outline all of that in a statement to the Assembly in the very near future.

Recycling

6. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his Department's plans to increase levels of recycling. (AQO 299/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for that question. I touched upon this answer in my reply to Mr McGlone. It seems to me that, given the technical and council improvements in recycling, we should set more challenging targets. Therefore, it is my intention to bring forward a proposal whereby the recycling target by the year 2020 should be at least 60%. Based upon experiences in other jurisdictions and our direction of travel, I believe that that is achievable in respect of municipal waste. The situation in respect of commercial industrial waste is somewhat more complex, because the evidence and statistical base is not as reliable as that for municipal waste. However, my

officials are interrogating that issue to see what more challenging targets could be met in that regard also.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up. That concludes Question Time.

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

3.00 pm

Ministerial Statements

Accident and Emergency Services: Belfast

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a statement to the Assembly on the important matter of accident and emergency services in the Belfast Trust, particularly in the light of the decision taken by the Belfast Trust on 7 September to close, on a temporary basis, the emergency department in the Belfast City Hospital.

The change will take effect on 1 November 2011 and will concentrate emergency department services in the Belfast Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust on the Royal Victoria Hospital and Mater Hospital sites. Those immediate changes will apply until there has been time to resolve a permanent way ahead through a full decision-making process.

Although this urgent decision on change is an operational matter for the Belfast Trust, I assure Members and the public that my Department has obtained assurances from both the trust and the Health and Social Care Board, as the commissioner of those services, that the temporary model of emergency department provision is safe and sustainable and that it will deliver high-quality care. I have insisted that all parts of this service have acted to ensure that there are appropriate emergency services for those who need them in the Belfast area and that the regional implications of that change, particularly in relation to the South Eastern, Northern and Ambulance Service Trusts, are well managed.

For people living in the greater Belfast area and beyond, I want to see a better emergency service than the one we have at present. The key to ensuring that such services are effective is the availability of expert decision-makers who know quickly what to do when faced with the wide range of conditions that need attention unexpectedly in A&E departments. For too long, we have been trying to cover rotas of doctors, which spread the time and attention

of those key doctors too thinly, meaning that the situation is too vulnerable to situations where junior doctors cannot get the advice that they need in managing patients who arrive with immediate needs.

I know that those changes will mean greater travelling times for some people in Belfast. The distance from the Belfast City Hospital emergency department to that in the Royal Victoria is 1.2 miles, and from Belfast City Hospital to the Mater Hospital it is 2.1 miles. Those distances are short compared with those that are the norm in rural areas, and they will be more than offset by the improved sustainability and safety of a model of care in A&E that ensures that the right medical rotas are in place in a way that is simply not possible in the status quo.

It has been claimed that the closure will place lives at risk. I deplore such ill-founded and irresponsible comment. The clear fact of the matter, based on expert clinical and management advice, is that, on the contrary, seeking to maintain the status quo would create risks that can no longer be managed safely. I recognise that there are major challenges in managing that change, and that is why I want the Assembly and the public to get behind the managers and clinicians in the Belfast Trust and all the other affected organisations to do all that we can to help make that temporary change work.

Although this urgent and necessary change has to go ahead now, my objective as Minister of Health is to ensure safe and sustainable emergency department service provision in the longer term. Any decision on the permanent reconfiguration of emergency department services will be a matter for me as Minister to determine, and it is a decision that I will take only after I have listened to what key stakeholders, in particular the public and their representatives, have to say through a process of effective engagement and open and transparent consultation.

When I spoke to the Health Committee at its meeting on 20 July 2011, I advised it that immediate changes to A&E service provision would be required in the interests of patient safety. In the light of the announcement by the Belfast Trust on 7 September, I want to further elaborate on why those immediate and temporary changes are required.

The drivers for change relate to the safety and quality of care; they are not efficiencies or cuts.

In fact, it is likely that some additional costs will arise in the short term as the trusts gear up to address this change. I repeat: this change is necessary to ensure patient safety; it is not a financial issue. I am very concerned that some people have chosen to try to make it an issue of finance, and I ask the House to be responsible when handling the issue today. The key issue is the need to ensure that there is an emergency service for Belfast and the nearby areas that works and meets the needs of the population.

The main reasons for immediate and temporary changes are: a shortfall in recruitment of suitably qualified medical staff, particularly middle-grade doctors; the need for adequate training and supervision arrangements for junior medical staff, especially at night-time; concern expressed by the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency (NIMDTA) and by the General Medical Council (GMC) in August 2011 regarding the current level of supervision of doctors, especially on the Royal and Belfast City hospital sites, thus requiring immediate action, which has now been taken; a general shortfall in medical trainees in emergency medicine, not just in Northern Ireland but in other parts of the UK; changes in the Home Office immigration rules, which make it more difficult to recruit doctors from overseas, including locums and middle-grade doctors; and changes in the working practices of staff and the need to promote compliance with the European working time directive, which was designed to promote safer patient care and enhance the well-being of doctors who had previously worked very long hours.

My Department has been advised by the Belfast Trust and the HSC Board that immediate changes to improve supervision of junior doctors have been achieved, but that it has involved considerable rota redesign, significant reliance on locums, support from other trusts, and the goodwill of medical staff in the Belfast Trust. The HSC Board has highlighted that there would be inherent vulnerabilities in sustaining such immediate changes beyond an eight-week period; hence the need for further temporary change from 1 November 2011. For that reason, an emergency department service model involving temporary closure of the Belfast City Hospital emergency department will be put in place from 1 November 2011.

While further details on the actual model are being refined by the trust, the end of October 2011 will provide sufficient time for other local

trusts, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service and GP out-of-hours services to plan for such a change. Inevitably, there will be additional pressures in other trust areas as a result of that change, both in terms of attendances at emergency departments and admissions to hospital. Therefore, as part of the contingency planning arrangements, further work is required on patient flows, and there will be a need for ongoing monitoring once the changes are put in place. However, I am sure that Members will agree with me that putting contingency plans in place now is a far better and safer approach than having unplanned cessation of services, especially over the winter months.

Let me say again: my first concern is the safety of patient care. There is, and there will continue to be, a 24/7 emergency service in the Belfast Trust. The changes are necessary to sustain that service provision. I am advised by the HSC Board that the Belfast Trust has looked at other options, including limiting opening hours in the Belfast City Hospital emergency department or putting in place a minor injuries unit on that site. However, the option that the trust has chosen, that is, a 24/7 service on the Royal and Mater hospital sites, will bring together greater medical consultant capacity on those sites and will provide better access to specialists outside of normal working hours and at weekends. That will be further complemented by specialty trainees and locum cover.

Such arrangements will address the issue of supervision of junior doctors, and rotas will be compliant with the statutory requirements of the European working time directive. It is my understanding that that there will be no staff reductions as a result of the changes, but that there will be a requirement for staff reconfiguration.

Under those arrangements, an important category of patients will continue to be admitted to the Belfast City Hospital when they face an unexpected need for urgent hospital care. That is because the proposed plan is to have a medical assessment unit and an acute assessment facility on site in the Belfast City Hospital. That will help patients with acute medical conditions, such as those who have been referred by a GP and it will provide rapid and timely intervention for patients.

There will also be patient pathways in place for specialty admissions when an urgent need

arises; for example, for patients who have certain cancers and renal conditions. Thus, while Belfast City Hospital will no longer receive self-referrals from members of the public who, up to now, have attended the A&E department there, it is anticipated that a proportion of people who need urgent care will still be admitted directly to the hospital without having to be assessed at one of the other busy A&E departments. To meet the anticipated increase in demand at the Royal, additional funding has been allocated to the Belfast Trust to undertake some refurbishment of the A&E department to create additional capacity. That will include a nine-bed short-stay unit in the emergency department, which will be open 24/7 for patients who require interventions with a length of stay of less than 24 hours. In addition, an acute medical admissions unit will operate 24/7 for patients who need a 24- to 48-hour length of stay. There is also a plan to relocate the eye casualty to alternative accommodation. Those changes, together with enhanced arrangements for ambulatory care, will assist in meeting the additional pressures on the system.

Some minor works are also in hand at the Ulster Hospital, which is likely to see additional patients as a result of the temporary closure. Those works include upgrading and bringing back into use a disused ward and creating a clinical decision unit to accelerate patient flow.

I reiterate the important point that the change will be subject to close and ongoing monitoring, but, in the longer term, a strategic decision will need to be taken on the provision of emergency department services in the greater Belfast area. As I said, that will be a decision for me, as Minister, to take. I will take that decision only after a full and open process of consultation and engagement. I anticipate taking a strategic decision on these matters later in 2012.

Finally, I emphasise that the public also have a role to play in making emergency services more effective by using the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service's 999 calls only when needed. In addition, individuals should think carefully about whether an emergency department is the most appropriate place for treatment of their specific minor ailment or injury. For example, it may be better to access treatment via their local GP or pharmacy.

I commend the statement to the House.

Ms Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Health Committee on this important issue. I think that it is fair to say that the Committee is of the view that the priority must be the provision of adequate accident and emergency facilities across the Six Counties. A&E services need to be configured in a way that meets the needs of the entire population in an equitable manner. Although the decision to change the provision of services must be given careful consideration, we cannot forget that, ultimately, Belfast currently has three A&Es within two miles of each other. I am sure that many of us from more rural constituencies would agree that that seems somewhat of an anomaly, given that some people have to travel for over an hour to get to their nearest hospital.

In respect of the statement, has the Minister engaged with the trade unions on the issue and sought to allay any concerns that they raised?

Mr Poots: Personally, I have not been engaging because this has not been my decision. This is a decision that trusts are taking on a safety issue. Certainly, next year, if we move to a long-term consideration of emergency services in the Belfast Trust area and beyond, we will engage in full consultation before arriving at a decision. I understand that trade unions are represented on the board of the Belfast Trust. Therefore, they have had the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. They may well disagree with the outcome, but they certainly have been part of the process that led to it.

Mr Wells: I realise that the Minister has dealt with some of this in his statement, but there is still a view out there and an accusation being made that this is not an issue of patient care or of ensuring the proper rotas of clinicians but is, in fact, a money-saving budgetary exercise. Will the Minister comment on the fear of many that this could be a way of saving money for the Department?

Mr Poots: As it stands, it is actually costing the Department money, because we have to carry out works at the Royal site to ensure adequate physical capacity to provide the appropriate space for the clinicians, nursing staff, and so forth, to operate.

3.15 pm

This decision came about as a result of a number of factors. First, in June, the NIMDTA carried out a report on the supervision of junior doctors. The report raised some matters of concern for the Belfast Trust. The Mater site got a B2, which indicated that there were some problems but that they were not of serious significance and could be overcome. However, in the report, the Royal and, indeed, Belfast City Hospital sites were given an F grade, which is the lowest grading that they could receive, for the supervision of junior doctors. That was followed up by the GMC in August, when it indicated that it would withdraw services from the Royal and the Belfast City sites within 24 hours if the trust did not respond to the issue of adequate supervision of doctors. That is the critical nature of where we are today. This is not to do with money. It is to do with the supervision of junior doctors and, indeed, patient safety. Further to that, two registrars who were working in the Belfast City Hospital had given notice that they were to step down from their positions on 30 September 2011.

For all those reasons, it is physically impossible to maintain a service across three sites in Belfast. We have, therefore, arrived at a conclusion that we have based, first and foremost, on patient safety. Some people may say that it was wrong for the GMC to indicate that it was prepared to withdraw its support for the provision of doctors at the site. However, a duty of care needs to be applied in such instances. When junior doctors are left responsible for a decision-making process that is way beyond their pay grade, there is the potential for them to make the wrong decision, and had that happened, the GMC would not have fulfilled its duty of care. So, I am not critical of it for highlighting its concerns about the situation that prevailed in the Belfast Trust, particularly at the two aforementioned hospitals.

Mr McCallister: I want to ask the Minister about two points. Given the numbers treated at the Belfast City Hospital's A&E unit, is he confident that the structures at the Royal and the Mater will be able to cope? In an earlier answer, he mentioned that this will be very much doctor and consultant led. However, will the physical infrastructure on the other two sites be able to cope, given the many thousands of people who are currently treated at the City's A&E?

The Minister stated:

"it is anticipated that a proportion of people who need urgent care will still be admitted directly to the City".

Will he put a bit more meat on that and shore it up to give people absolute confidence that they can be admitted directly to the City Hospital's regional specialist facilities?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. We are currently creating a nine-bed short-stay unit in the emergency department at the Royal that will be open 24/7 for patients who require interventions and need to stay for less than 24 hours. We will also have an acute medical admissions unit that will operate 24/7 for patients who need to stay for between 24 hours and 48 hours and will enhance the arrangements for ambulatory care. All of those things will help to deal with the capacity issue.

The fact that the site will be covered by more senior doctors will ensure that there is a much better flow through the site. In circumstances where junior doctors are the decision-makers, they tend to engage in more tests, do more X-rays and go through more processes to satisfy themselves because they do not have the experience or the skills base. However, in circumstances where consultants and registrars, who have considerable experience in decision-making, are the decision-makers, the evidence shows that there is a much better flow of patients. That will, therefore, make a significance difference to the numbers of people who pass through.

The admissions unit at Belfast City Hospital will largely be for people who are patients of the hospital at, for example, the renal unit or the cancer unit. Such people will have been referred there by their GPs. That will take thousands of people directly to that facility, rather than their having to go through the Royal's A&E in order to be admitted to the City Hospital.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. The Committee recognises fully the need for reconfiguration and modernisation of emergency care throughout the North. However, given the capacity issues that the closure will inevitably create for the remaining A&E departments in the greater Belfast area — issues that Mr McCallister raised — the Committee is concerned that the statement

is premature and could ultimately undermine public confidence in the health service. We can scarcely afford to do that at this time of austerity and change.

Following on from the Minister's answer to the previous question, when will the nine-bed unit be ready? When it is ready, will there be more or less capacity than is currently available with the City Hospital's A&E department in operation? If the answer is less, can it really be viewed as a clinical decision?

Mr Poots: When the Member arrived at the point at which he said that the statement was premature, I was not sure whether he had listened to anything that I have said thus far. When the GMC indicates that it will withdraw its doctors' services within 24 hours if we do not respond, and the emergency response by which a level of cover is provided is not sustainable for more than a couple of months, one needs to make decisions as opposed to procrastinating, as the Member has recommended. It was not a hasty decision. It was an urgent decision that was based on need and what was required to ensure that there is adequate medical cover in the Belfast Trust area.

As regards the number of cubicles, and so forth, that are available, key to that particular issue is that there be adequate medical staff cover at senior grades, so that the right people are in the right location to see the community that needs their services. The Royal does not just act as a local hospital but as a regional facility for a range of services. It is totally unacceptable that the regional trauma unit is manned by junior doctors six nights out of seven. If people want that kind of service, they may get another Minister. It is not the kind of service that I want to be in place in the Belfast Trust, which provides that service not only to local people but to people right across the Province. We are not doing as well as we should on trauma care. I want to look at and address that area. It will certainly not be addressed by asking junior doctors to do that task. We need to move the service on.

Mr Spratt: The Minister mentioned the new trauma unit at the Royal. My understanding is that that building will take some time to complete. Given that, in 2010, the City Hospital's A&E department had 40,000-odd patients, does he believe that the Royal will be

able to cope with the additional numbers that it will get as a result of the department's closure?

Mr Poots: In and of itself, it will not. However, it is anticipated that not all the people who currently use the City Hospital will use the Royal. I mentioned that some people will still be admitted directly to the City Hospital. We are looking at the potential for a further 10,000 attendances at the Ulster Hospital, which has been making preparations for such a scenario. Three additional A&E consultants are being recruited to the Ulster Hospital, which will help it considerably. Two of those consultants will be in place from November 2011. Observation bed capacity in its A&E department will be increased. Additional nursing, allied health professional and social work support will be made available to improve the flow of patients. An older ward has been recommissioned and put in use to assist in that service.

The Mater Hospital is expected to pick up an additional 6,000 attendances. To assist it to cope, it has enhanced its facilities. The Mater already has a medical assessment unit in place. That will be augmented by a short-stay unit, improvements in patients' pathways for chest pain and urgent review to reduce unnecessary admissions. It is also working to improve the capacity in older people's services at the interface between community and hospital care.

So, a number of steps are being taken in hospitals other than the Royal to make up the shortfall that would exist were the services at the City Hospital to close.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his statement. During the previous mandate, I worked in Antrim Area Hospital. In that time, we had the downgrading of Whiteabbey Hospital and the Mid-Ulster Hospital, and I saw at first hand how that affected service users and staff after what seemed like little or no planning. I welcome that you seem to have put preparations in place for both the Royal and the Mater.

Did the reconfiguration of services just start in May?

Mr Poots: From what I can see, there have been difficulties with recruitment for some time, which would have been going on before May. With regard to the services that are provided, we have had to make the decisions based on the availability of doctors, particularly those at a senior grade, and there have been challenges

with getting enough junior doctors. That led to the situation in Lagan Valley Hospital where hours had to be reduced. Initially, the hours were supposed to be reduced to cover 9.00 am to 5.00 pm, but we managed to get that up to 9.00 am to 8.00 pm. The trust is working to extend those hours further, and, ultimately, we are hoping to have a 24/7 operation at Lagan Valley again, hopefully with the support of local GPs. That work has still to be done.

The issue that we have is that there are considerable problems in recruiting doctors to A&E departments. The general public need to recognise that much of the work that doctors engage in is carried out in unsociable hours and that the interface that they have can very often be with patients who do not fully appreciate the care that they are receiving and who can engage in a very unbecoming way with medical staff, which is wholly unsatisfactory. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise to Members that doctors do not very often make A&E their first choice. There are many better options for them when it comes to the hours that they are expected to work and to the appreciation that is shown to them by members of the public, which does not involve violence or foul language.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank the Minister for his statement, for setting out his thinking on this issue and explaining how he arrived at the conclusion that, as he said, we have come to.

It is a controversial decision, particularly in south Belfast, and it merits explanation. I note that he says that there will be an extra 10,000 visits to the Ulster Hospital and that he has put steps in place for that, including three extra consultants. The Ulster Hospital was designed for 30,000 visits a year, yet it is currently receiving 70,000 a year and we are still some time away from the new A&E department being ready there. Also, the new critical care unit at the Royal, which Mr Spratt mentioned, is under construction and is probably still a couple of years away from completion. As a result, the A&E in the Royal is in temporary buildings.

My question, therefore, is about the Mater and City Hospitals. The Minister makes the argument that we cannot have three A&E departments in Belfast and that we must have two. Why did he choose to close the A&E department at the City Hospital and not that at the Mater, bearing in mind that the proposed future for the Mater is as a local hospital with

a minor injuries unit, whereas the City will continue to be a major acute hospital and a teaching hospital? Will he explain why he made that decision?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. It is relatively simple: if we go back to the NIMDTA report, the Mater received a B grade for its supervision of doctors whereas the City Hospital and the Royal received F grades.

Additionally, the registrars who resigned did not do so from the Mater Hospital; they resigned from the City Hospital. Therefore, clinically, it was considerably easier to maintain the service in the Mater Hospital than in the City Hospital.

3.30 pm

I did not make any decisions on the matter. This was an operational decision, taken by the Belfast Trust in response to patient safety issues and to ensure that patients are treated and cared for in an appropriate manner. It was also taken to ensure that junior doctors receive appropriate guidance, and it is absolutely critical that that should happen. Where will we be in a number of years' time if junior doctors continue to carry out work without getting proper guidance and support? Guidance is a key element in their training, and if we do not adequately and properly train doctors it will leave us in a bleak and dark place.

Mr McDevitt: As the Minister considers this decision to be operational rather than ministerial, will he confirm that, even with the new facilities that are to be added to the Royal Victoria Hospital, fewer beds will be available in A&E to the people of Belfast than are currently available in the Royal Victoria and Belfast City hospitals? Does he have confidence in the Belfast Trust, given that it appeared to allow a situation to evolve, over what one would presume was a fairly considerable period, which led to an operational decision being taken that is clearly not in the interests of the people of this city?

Mr Poots: I am satisfied that the current Belfast Trust management are taking decisions that are soundly based and will ensure that patient safety is a top priority. I am also satisfied that they are looking for the best outcomes for those who attend hospital.

The Member has the wrong focus when it comes to the issue of beds; it should be on the

people who actually man the hospital wards. We will have the appropriate personnel delivering services in the A&E departments, which is currently not the case. It is critical that we get the right people to carry out those services.

The Member may be satisfied if a member of his family were to attend one of those services late in the evening with internal bleeding or a serious trauma and to be treated by a junior doctor, as that would allow two emergency departments to be kept open. I prefer to travel 1.2 miles extra and ensure that I am treated by someone who has the experience and skills to deal with such a major emergency. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind Members that when a question has been asked the Minister has the Floor. An Adjournment debate on this issue is scheduled for later today, during which everyone can say their piece.

Mr Poots: Capacity is being increased at the Royal Victoria and Mater hospitals, and the patterns of patient flow and decision making will also change. We anticipate that there will be a lower requirement on beds. There will be much better patient throughput as a result of having skilled people in place who can provide support and advice to younger doctors and ensure that decisions are made in a timely and appropriate manner.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement. I am very much aware that the A&E department at the Ulster Hospital in Dundonald is overstretched. How can it be expected to cope with more attendances as a result of the proposed changes?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. I covered the issues around A&E departments earlier, and it is absolutely critical that the appropriate cover is in place. As things stand, the Ulster Hospital deals with the greatest number of A&E patients. That may change after the changes are made. The Ulster Hospital has been looking for new consultants for its facility. The number of consultants will be increased from five to eight. Two of those people will be in place for 1 November, so the Ulster Hospital will have seven of the eight consultants required. The Ulster Hospital is also changing the facility itself, and patient flow will be improved considerably as a result of the actions taken.

We recognise that the Ulster Hospital has been under a fair degree of pressure, particularly

when the norovirus struck the wards over the summer. There was a very poor patient flow in that situation, but the steps that have been put in place should more than offset the additional numbers that are coming in.

Mrs Lewis: I also thank the Minister for his statement and for the clarification. When will the new critical care building at the Royal be operational? Does this change impact on those plans? Will there be an impact on Antrim Area Hospital?

Mr Poots: It will probably be 2013 before the new building at the Royal comes into play. It would have been desirable to wait until then to make these changes. Nonetheless, it was necessary to move ahead now because of the issues that I have outlined in today's discussion.

The previous Minister's idea was that we should wait until the Royal site facility and the Dundonald facility were open. Under his plans, the Ulster Hospital facility would not be open until 2020. That type of procrastination will not deal with the issues in the health service. We cannot wait for nine years to deal with issues. We need to deal with them now. That is very clear to me as we move ahead on this issue.

There may be some new attendances at Antrim Area Hospital. As things stand, a number of people from the Antrim Borough Council area attend the Belfast City Hospital site. The Northern Trust has been alerted to that. It has been indicated to them that they need to prepare for additional throughput at Antrim Area Hospital as a result. As the Member well knows, there have been a considerable number of problems in Antrim. Those have been improved on to some extent. We are building a new £13 million facility at Antrim Area Hospital, which I believe will considerably assist inpatient throughput and flows.

Mr Allister: Is it the case that what is termed the "temporary closure" of the City Hospital A&E department is but language deployed to give a soft landing to what is intended to be a permanent closure? Does the Minister think that the closure will be temporary?

Mr Poots: This decision has been taken because of circumstances, and, therefore, it is a temporary decision. Should we decide that the Belfast City Hospital A&E department should be closed permanently, we will go to the public and have a proper public consultation exercise.

We will engage with the public, the trade unions and others before making such a decision. This is not a ministerial decision on the permanent closure of a hospital but a trust's response to an urgent need and an urgent circumstance that has arisen for it. That is why the closure is described as temporary.

Mr McCarthy: In the last paragraph of the Minister's statement, he refers to the public having a role to play. I totally agree with that. Does he have any plans to launch a publicity campaign to ensure that the public knows when to go and when not to go to accident and emergency in order to reduce the number of people waiting in those departments? As I understand it, the number of people waiting for more than 12 hours is increasing. Would a publicity campaign help to direct people away who should not be at an A&E unit?

Mr Poots: It may well help. Another thing that may help, in which the Member may be interested, is a pilot scheme running in the Southern Trust in which a GP is engaged in triage. That has been tried in Manchester and, as a direct result, 20% of admissions to the A&E unit have been screened out. We are not in a position to indicate whether that will happen at the Royal site, for example, from 1 November, but the Belfast Trust is working in close consultation with the Southern Trust to identify the success or otherwise of that project. We may well be in a position to install a GP in triage, and, if that is the case, I think the general public will quite quickly get the message that they can come to A&E but they will not necessarily be admitted if the GP does not deem it suitable to do so.

One way or another, the message needs to get out that going to A&E should not be the immediate response to every illness and that often people should make an appointment with their GP. A GP will respond quickly when people need to be seen quickly. It is not the case that people with a significant problem would be asked to wait for 12 or 14 days; they should be seen within 48 hours.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I speak as a South Belfast representative, although I am acutely aware that we could be dealing with a decision around the Mater Hospital or the Royal this afternoon. I am very concerned. Our job is to ensure that the public have maximum

confidence in the decision taken, and I wish the Minister well in his ability to instil that confidence. Our primary purpose here is to ensure that patients and the general public have access to the best possible emergency care after this decision.

I welcome the Minister's statement and his response to many of the questions. From my point of view, whatever the source of the current problem, we need to look at many more fundamental issues, perhaps including long-term management issues, but that is a discussion for another day.

In trying to maximise public confidence in this decision, can the Minister assure the House that the contingency plans that he referred to in some detail will be in place by 1 November?

Mr Poots: That is the plan. I cannot say that this decision will work perfectly in a highly pressured environment on a January night. It did not work perfectly last year or the year before, and it is likely to face significant pressures this year, next year and for further years because those peak periods can create anomalies and problems. I believe it will be a better service than is currently available, because we will have the appropriate clinicians available to see people who require emergency care, particularly people who have had major and catastrophic incidents such as heart attacks, strokes, major traumas, road traffic collisions etc. Those people need appropriate care, and this will help us to ensure that that care is in place and that the right people will be there to deal with people who need that emergency care.

3.45 pm

Private Members' Business

Policing: Part-time Reserve Gratuity Scheme

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

Mr Hussey: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with regret the deduction of National Insurance and income tax from the £20 million part-time Reserve gratuity scheme; expresses concern at the security breach which put the identity and well-being of around 6,000 former part-time RUC officers at risk; and calls on the Minister of Justice to make a statement on the matter and detail what action has been taken in light of the security breach.

I begin by declaring an interest in the proposals as chairman of the Royal Ulster Constabulary GC Association part-time officers' welfare group. The motion, which I have the honour of moving, relates to all part-time officers who served between 1970 and 2009, but the vast majority will have had Royal Ulster Constabulary service only.

Over the 12 years of the campaign to recognise the service of the part-time Reserve, many Members past and present were lobbied, as were direct rule Ministers. The last Ministers to be lobbied were the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister, who paid tribute to the service of the brave men and women of the part-time Reserve and referred to the great debt that was owed to them. Clearly, debt has a different meaning in the office of the Prime Minister than it does in reality.

From day one, the intention was to provide some form of financial recognition for the service of part-time police officers through what have been described as the darkest hours of the Troubles. To those of us prepared to wear the uniform, it meant many hours spent away from our home with little financial reward. In the late 1970s, 100 hours of duty equated to a take-home pay of £50 to £60 per month. Many

part-time Reserve women served for over 25 years with the Reserve, it being their only form of employment, and, on retirement, their only pension entitlement was the state pension.

It would be wrong of me to proceed without mentioning the 72 who lost their life as a result of terrorist activity, the two part-time PSNI officers who lost their life as a result of a road traffic accident in Warrenpoint, the hundreds who were forced from their civilian jobs and those who were retired from the police as a result of injuries on duty and did not receive a pension. Although I will deal with the security breach later in my speech, I advise now that eight of those who were murdered had left the RUC at the time of their death.

The £20 million that was allocated to fund the package was negotiated at the Hillsborough talks, and it was always our belief that that payment would be a tax-free lump sum. No one expected a huge financial windfall, but it was believed that the payment would be a reasonable recognition of service. The proposals that were put forward for the scheme by the association were not accepted in their entirety by the Department of Justice. Amendments were made to several of the proposals, and it was not until fairly late in discussions that tax implications were mentioned.

Reference was made to other financial settlements, including those of the Royal Irish Regiment and the Northern Ireland Civil Service, where settlements were made with the tax liability being met by the employer. Deals were made by the various Departments with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), and the tax liability was met and payments made gross to recipients. That was not the case for the part-time Reserve: tax at 20% was deducted from earnings up to £2,917, with 40% being deducted from the balance.

I was awarded a gross amount of £8,314.41. Tax of £2,345.80 was deducted from that figure, as was £991.81 for the employer's National Insurance and £211.48 for the employee's National Insurance, leaving me a net payment of £4,765.72. For your information, I served for 26 years and was in the highest band — band six. Most of those who received that payment are not 40% taxpayers and never will be, but they are now obliged to claim a refund of the higher-rate tax that applied. I wonder what it cost the Treasury to process all the repayments.

Clearly, Her Majesty's Government have received a substantial return on the £20 million that they made available. In my case, of the £8,314.81, they took back £3,549.09 — approximately 42.5% of the award. The debt owed by the people of Northern Ireland to the part-time Royal Ulster Constabulary Reserve cannot be calculated in pounds, shillings and pence, but the fact that it was considered necessary to tax the payment indicates that the value put on the service of those brave men and women by Her Majesty's Government was not very high.

I will move on to the way in which the information about the payment of those awards was issued. Large white envelopes were used. In my case, the information contained in the window included "Omagh BT78 1HU" and the wording "Dear Mr Hussey, part-time Reserve gratuity payment". The Northern Ireland Civil Service and, indeed, the Northern Ireland Office and those associated with it are required to adhere to the protective marking scheme. On considering the marking, an official has to determine what the compromise of the information would be likely to do. For information to be treated as confidential, one of the definitions is that it would

"prejudice individual security or liberty".

For it to be treated as secret,

"The compromise of this information or material would be likely ... to threaten life directly, or seriously prejudice public order, or individual security or liberty".

It could be argued that both those definitions could apply, but, probably, the confidential marking would have been appropriate. That being the case, there are specific guidelines for the transmission of such information, which were completely disregarded.

I was made aware of the security blunder on Saturday 20 August, when I received a telephone call from a former Reserve member. She said that it now means that anyone who handled and delivered this envelope knows that someone living at her address has a connection with the RUC Reserve. She asked whether anyone who was administering that process had any common sense. She said that her home was attacked in 1986 when she and her mother were alone in the house. She told me that they had to relocate immediately, staying for some time in the section house. She was

concerned not only at putting her family through the worry that her personal details have been put in the public domain but that this serious breach of the Data Protection Act 1998 could have happened to other colleagues who reside in areas of the Province which, for them, still carry a personal security risk. My personal security is not a particular problem, because, as a politician, I am in the public domain, but that lady was clearly very upset when she spoke to me. I have removed all the personal information that she passed to me and I have referred the many e-mails that I have received from colleagues directly to the Department of Justice and the PSNI.

Before closing, I want to read to the House a letter that I received from a member of my committee, a lady who is a personal friend and for whom I have the highest regard:

"Thirteen years ago my car was set on fire, my house was petrol bombed. I was quickly moved with very little belongings to another location, and then spent six long months finding what I thought was the house I was going to settle into. At great cost to ourselves and none to the Government my husband had security cameras, recording systems and Sapphire fitted to the house. My mortgage had to be increased and my payment duration extended to enable me to live in an area the Police Security Branch and my family considered safe. My belongings when I finally retrieved them from storage were practically destroyed not counting what had been stolen and I had to start all over again ... After ten months sick leave from work, a transfer to another job location, a different car I finally lived with the matter until Saturday morning. I spend gallons on diesel going different routes to and from work, picking who my friends are, where I do my weekly grocery shop, updating myself with security alerts, looking under my car, sitting in the house in the dark rather than put the lights on, or worse still having my blinds and curtains closed when not needed, and have nothing to do with my Police colleagues outside of what social life I have.

Since Saturday morning I have had flashbacks. Last night at 02:30 hrs I was sitting at the living room window drinking coffee and playing everything back in my mind of the horrific night my family was moved because of the job I had. At lunch time today I asked to go home from work as I can't get this out of my mind. My stomach is heaving at the thought of having to go through a move again and at the moment feel physically sick".

The words of my colleague say it all.

There is a question that has to be answered: what action has the Minister taken to ensure that serving and former officers are guaranteed safety in their home? Many who were prepared to risk their life for the security of the Province have had their personal security threatened by gross incompetence. They feel that they have been treated with contempt by the Department of Justice and by Her Majesty's Government. A grovelling apology to the House will not be sufficient to satisfy the upset that this farcical set of circumstances has created.

Mr S Anderson: I can certainly stand here this afternoon and give my full support to the motion. I appreciate all Mr Hussey's work and the role that he played as chair of the RUC George Cross Association part-time officers' welfare group, and I know that he previously expressed frustration about the failure to make meaningful progress in the past. But we are here today and we have made progress, and I know that my party played a great part in securing the £20 million.

I turn to the issues addressed in the motion. It is certainly a disgrace that the brave men and women of the part-time RUC and the widows of those who have passed on are being treated in such a shoddy manner. All who served in the police during the Troubles displayed great courage, but part-time RUC officers were especially vulnerable because of their civilian jobs. Out of love for their country, they proudly wore the uniform of the RUC, and the terrorist threat could not have been contained without them, a fact that has been acknowledged by the full-time force. Belatedly, they were given some hope of recognition, when the announcement that they would receive a gratuity was made in early 2010. They have now been left with a bad taste in the mouth, and they feel shabbily treated.

The motion addresses two concerns. First, it is a disgrace that the gratuity is not exempt from tax and National Insurance. It seems to me that there has been a lot of ducking and weaving by the Secretary of State and the Justice Minister. The Secretary of State tells us that it is a matter for the Treasury in London. The Justice Minister tells us that he is merely the administrator of the scheme. Those two men are in positions of authority and influence, so they really ought to display more guts and determination. Where there is a will, there is a way. I suspect that officials in the Treasury and the Department who designed the details of the

scheme probably feel a lot happier. After all, by including tax and National Insurance, they have managed to cut costs, and they know that only a small percentage of former reservists will query the matter.

I know of an elderly man who served from 1972 to 1990. He is now 82, yet he had a large part of his gratuity taxed at 40%. As an elderly pensioner, is he likely to be earning in excess of £42,000 a year? He took time to seek professional advice and challenged the calculations but, instead of giving an answer, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) asked him how the gratuity scheme was taxed. Take note: he was asked how the scheme is taxed. Surely, that says it all.

The second issue in the motion is potentially even more serious, because it compromises and endangers personal safety. Those who had been looking forward to receiving their gratuity are now feeling vulnerable and threatened. As we all know, the payments were issued in envelopes that clearly showed that they contained a part-time Reserve gratuity payment. The Minister cannot wash his hands of this fiasco. It happened on his watch, and his officials have blundered badly. An apology from the Minister is not enough. His reputation and that of his Department have been damaged. I look forward to hearing the outcome of his review of the incident, but, to be honest, this place is coming down with reviews or promises of reviews. A review cannot undo the damage that has been done.

All in all, this has been a comedy of errors, but those who feel threatened and vulnerable are certainly not laughing. Are we to repay their bravery by short-changing them and causing them to experience the stress and worry that they and we thought was a thing of the past?

4.00 pm

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ní bheimid ag tabhairt tacaíochta don rún. We will not be supporting the motion. Our opposition to the gratuity payment is on public record, so I will not rehearse that today. It follows that the idea that a gratuity payment, in the circumstances in which it was paid, should be tax exempt will lead us not to support the motion.

The latter part of the motion is something with which there are issues. It was publicly

articulated that people felt vulnerable as a result of how the Department handled the correspondence to those involved. The Minister has publicly apologised for that, and we wait to hear the details today of how his Department will take steps to ensure that people are not exposed to such vulnerability in future. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McDevitt: We are very happy to participate in today's debate. We are also happy to express our support to those in any walk of life who seek to have their rights as workers upheld. It is the view of the SDLP and, I think, that of the vast majority of people in this region that no matter what political context you may wish to put on the part-time Reserve and no matter how you wish to view the role that it played in contemporary policing in this region, those are separate issues from the rights of people who did a job to receive fair and equal treatment at the point at which they ceased to do so. It is for that reason that the party that I represent was always clear in its advocacy of equality and parity of treatment for part-time reservists along with any other former members of the RUC. It is for that reason that we have sympathy with the lobby that has been represented today in the House by Mr Hussey, which is one that is based on pretty sound grounds of equality and fairness. I do not wish to take the conversation much further on that point.

The second part of the motion relates to what has become an all-too-common occurrence in recent months; a failure to uphold the security of people in our community. Again, irrespective of how one may wish to interpret the context in which an individual may have a duty to be protected, the bottom line remains that every member or former member of any public service organisation has a legitimate expectation to be protected and to have the duty of care of his or her employer upheld. It is exceptionally disappointing that people, some of whom will have been directly or indirectly victimised by the Troubles, should have their security breached. It is an exceptionally serious matter.

I agree with Mr Hussey: it takes more than just an apology to fix it. It is the same for a former police officer as it would be for anyone else in any other aspect of life where their employer has failed in a basic duty of care towards them. We will happily support the motion on grounds of basic fairness and equality for all.

Mr Dickson: I echo the words of Mr Hussey in the Chamber this afternoon and place on record my gratitude for, and recognition of, the bravery of the RUC Reserve George Cross. I also express my regret that deductions of tax and National Insurance were made from the part-time Reserve payment scheme. Unfortunately, however, the Minister is playing the hand that he was dealt. People may not like that, but it was agreed by others prior to devolution and was handed to him in a way that he was unable to change, despite his efforts to do so. The figure of £20 million was agreed before the devolution of policing and justice, and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs can operate only within the parameters of existing tax and National Insurance law in the United Kingdom. Therefore, the Department must administer the scheme that was set out in accordance with the law.

I know that the Minister has done all that he can to press the issue with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on several occasions, but, unfortunately, it appears that any opportunity to improve the details of the scheme arose long before he was given the task of delivering on a commitment that was made by others. Once that die was cast in the initial agreement, little or nothing could be done to reverse the situation, but I commend the Minister for his efforts.

I also add my expressions of concern about the gratuity scheme security breach. Clearly, that is very disturbing and a worrying situation for the part-time reservists and their families whose security has been potentially compromised. Having placed themselves in harm's way in the past to protect the people of Northern Ireland, they certainly deserved better, and I regret this administrative blunder that has led to such distress. However, a very important point has to be made. The error was made by administrative staff, not by the Minister. The Minister does not lick the envelopes or put the stamps on. For government to function, there must be reasonable reliance on public servants to undertake administrative tasks efficiently and effectively. Unfortunately, the incident has highlighted a particular area of incompetence. However, the Minister cannot involve himself in the administrative duties of the Department because that would undermine his ability to conduct his duties effectively, yet some Members in this Chamber and elsewhere are set on blaming him.

Perhaps the 'Belfast Telegraph' had it right when it stated that the calls for the Minister's resignation are "a foolish knee-jerk reaction" and that he could not be blamed for the administrative error. The paper also complimented the Minister on his quick and decisive reaction. I echo those compliments and commend the Minister for his swift response in initiating an urgent security assessment, establishing a helpline for those who had concerns about their security. I am sure that Mr Hussey referred all of his colleagues to that helpline. Indeed, when the organisation that was providing that helpline struggled to cope with the number of calls, the Minister's Department put in additional staff to strengthen the service that was being offered.

The Minister has tackled the error swiftly and efficiently, and I place on record my thanks for his efforts. I support the motion, and I ask the Minister to outline to the Assembly what steps are being taken to ensure that the mistakes that were made in this case are identified and what lessons can be learned from it for the future.

Mr Wells: I join other Members in paying tribute to the courage and dedication of those who have served the community for many decades and acted as a bulwark between the ordinary decent citizens of the Province and the terrorists. The part-time RUC Reserve did a magnificent job in very difficult conditions. Indeed, I remember talking to one member of the part-time Reserve in my constituency who told me that, at night, when he was out doing road checks, he often came across known IRA terrorists who had previous convictions for murder and other heinous deeds. During the daytime, he was delivering bread to the doors of the very same individuals. That is the level of risk that those men — the vast majority, of course, were men — were placing themselves in. He was on his own, delivering bread in a situation where he was a very easy target.

The fact that such individuals spent 10, 15 or 20 years protecting this community means that they should have been given the highest possible level of recognition and treatment. It is extremely regrettable that, as a result of an administrative mistake, tax and national insurance has been deducted from the gratuity that they so richly deserved. No one can put a monetary value on the work that those men and women have done for the Province. The type of payments that we are talking about is simply a token recognition of their value to society and

what they have done for the ordinary, decent citizen. However, having achieved that gratuity as a direct result of my party's negotiations, they have been shabbily treated by having large amounts deducted through tax and National Insurance.

When it comes to the issue of how those cheques were posted out, heads should roll. Frankly, it is absolutely inexcusable that whoever was responsible for putting those cheques into those envelopes left themselves in the position whereby they left individual former members of the part-time Reserve immediately identifiable.

I will give you an example. When my credit card comes through the post, the company concerned takes precautions as follows: it is in a plain white envelope, the address is handwritten and there is a postage stamp on it. Why is that done? So that no one handling that item of correspondence could identify it as my credit card. By the way, my credit card is, frankly, hardly worth having, but still. *[Laughter.]* The postman would be wasting his time if he opened my envelope. However, the company concerned is taking sensible precautions to ensure that it is not identified as my credit card coming to my address.

What were the people thinking when they decided to send out that cheque in an envelope that clearly identified the person as a former member of the part-time Reserve? I just cannot understand how such a basic mistake was made, and I hope that, when the inquiry is concluded, those who made absolutely fundamental mistakes will be disciplined and the person responsible will be removed from post. This is not rocket science. Did nobody sit down for one moment and say, "Hold on a minute; does that not identify who we are sending the envelopes to?"

I know that the vast majority of postmen and those who sort mail in Northern Ireland are honourable, upright people and, in many areas, including large areas of south Down, I am completely confident that the people who handle and deliver the mail in no way use the information that was so readily obtainable to identify, target and pass on information to sinister elements that Mr Smith or Mr Jones is a former part-time member of the RUC Reserve. However, the reality is that there are still one or two individuals out there who could make use of that information, and, if one former member of the part-time RUC Reserve's security has been

placed at risk as a result of this mistake, I see that as a very serious lack of attention to detail and thoughtfulness. I was flabbergasted to open my newspaper, discover this story and start to receive complaints from individuals. I could not believe that it had happened, because it is not the first time. There have been numerous previous examples, and it is absolutely unforgivable.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the opportunity to comment on the debate today and, like many other representatives in the room, I have directly assisted many constituents in applying for this payment. The considerable blunder by the Department of Justice in using entirely the wrong sort of envelope and not taking the very simple step of looking at the envelope to ensure that it was not possible to see what the letter is about is, of course, totally unacceptable.

This matter has caused concern to many people, and, indeed, a similar blunder was made by the Service Personnel and Veterans Agency in their war pensions payments only last year. That blunder affected many ex-security force members in Northern Ireland. Indeed, a number of people in my constituency felt let down by the Government over that situation. It is completely unacceptable to have a situation whereby government, while trying to be of service to people, actually do them a disservice. Many ex-members and their families are, rightly, very security-conscious, given the renewed terrorist threat from dissident republicans. Therefore, for those letters to be sent out with the content clearly visible was and continues to be a huge issue for them, and one can fully understand their concern.

The apology from the Justice Minister was inadequate and, given the very serious ramifications of the security breach, the Minister needs to explain in detail what went wrong. Who made the decision to use windowed envelopes, and why did no one feel the need to check them to ensure that the recipient's security was not unnecessarily undermined? Security surely must be one of the key parts of any Department, none more so than the Department of Justice.

I will move to the issue of the taxation of the payments. That is extremely infuriating as, again, it smacks of government giving with one hand and taking away with the other. A gratuity payment, by its very nature, should be offered in full, and no more so than when we consider the

great sacrifice made by members of the RUC and their families throughout the Troubles.

The Government's decision to tax that payment was unfortunate. Coupled with the security breach, it has left a bitter taste. However, I have spoken to those who received the payment, and they are grateful for the sum. I know that many others, despite the difficulties, genuinely appreciate those, including senior members in my party, who worked hard to make that gratuity payment special scheme a reality. I await with interest the response of Justice Minister David Ford and I thank the Members who tabled the motion.

4.15 pm

Mr Copeland: In addressing this issue, I seek to give offence to no one and to tread carefully. However, it is important that we understand that the men and women of the Royal Ulster Constabulary Reserve and their colleagues in the police force, the Ulster Defence Regiment and the regular army were among those who, in the darkest days of this Province, put themselves in harm's way. Now they find that an amount of money, which is not large, is given to them, with tax and National Insurance deducted from it. It is delivered to them in an envelope that identifies their place of residence and their former service.

It is hard to understand the impact of that unless, like some in the Chamber, you lived through it. Even to this day, turning the ignition of your car and the engine firing without the bonnet exploding brings a sigh of relief. To this day, it is hard to understand not letting more than one person into your car before it bumps down the kerb that separates the pavement from the road, so that, if a mercury tilt switch is under the bonnet, only one person will be injured, or the inability to hang work shirts on the line in case the neighbours see it.

All of that is not a symbol of grumpy men and women with a history of service approaching middle age. It is not a symbol of their living in the past but of the past living in them, because what a section of this society went through and was put through cannot be adequately quantified in words or represented and offset by money.

It is unfair to blame Minister Ford individually, although his colleague's notion of ministerial responsibility is, perhaps, somewhat skewed. However, someone somewhere took a decision that brought back a nightmare for a large

number of people. I had three people in my office who all expressed concerns, one of whom was identified when the forms were first sent out because the envelope delivered through the post had been tampered with.

I cannot begin to try to explain to those who did not live through that how the impact of events in the past impinges on the present. I know what it is like to get a telephone call from the guardroom in Hastings Street police station that begins, "There's been a shooting". The thumping heart, the dryness, the shaking, the drive to try to find out where to go to find out the truth and the relief when — thank God, in my case — it was not serious. No one can understand the way that comes back. In one case, which I can speak of because it was very close to me, it resurfaced 31 years after the event, with a thrashing in the bed and the quoting of courtesy as an essential quality and one that will smooth many a path; instantly known to anyone here as one of the definitions of being a constable in the Royal Ulster Constabulary.

Whoever made this mistake, Minister, with no vindictiveness speak to them and make sure, please, that it does not happen again. I support the motion.

Mr A Maginness: I suppose that because of our unhappy history and divided political loyalties, it is difficult for somebody like me to share the view expressed about the RUC and the RUC Reserve. Nonetheless, I have to recognise the fact, as do other Members, that members of the RUC Reserve were cruelly targeted because they were soft targets. They were targeted by the IRA in a murder campaign against them. Therefore, it should be recognised that those men and women gave to this society and that they suffered. We should all regret and be ashamed of that suffering. It is wrong that those people were targeted, attacked and, in some instances, murdered because they carried out civilian jobs and were accessible, contactable and targetable.

Special recognition is rightly given to those people. As an outworking of the Patten reforms, it is right and proper that a gratuity should be given, and that gratuity has been given. However, it seems rather shabby that the Government should give a gratuity and then say that it should be taxed and have National Insurance contributions deducted. I thought that

a gratuity was a gratuity. If £20 million was given as a global figure for a gratuity, it should have been £20 million, not £20 million minus 40% or whatever percentage it might be. Members of the Reserve can, quite rightly, say that they have been shabbily treated. It seems grossly unfair and insensitive to tax that gratuity.

Their situation is worsened by the incompetence of the Department in sending out envelopes that were clearly identifiable and exposed people, although perhaps not to the extent that some Members have suggested today, to a risk that they should not have been exposed to. I take the point that Mr Copeland made that it has brought back memories to people who served in the Reserve, and that is particularly regrettable. It was not simply incompetence; it was negligence, and it should be marked as such. It was inexcusable. The Department should, rightly, be criticised for the way in which it carried out the exercise.

The taxation issue should have been anticipated by the NIO, the Police Federation or whoever. It should not have taken people by surprise. When the Treasury gets its teeth into something, it does not let go. People should reflect on the way in which the exercise was conducted and the regrettable aspects. The SDLP supports the motion.

Mr D McIlveen: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in the debate. I fully support the motion. I feel that it is another let-down in a long list that the part-time Reserve folk have had to endure. I feel that they have been treated abysmally.

I begin by acknowledging the debt that we owe those people. They are true local heroes. In my view, their treatment to date has been something of a let-down. I believe that we need to redress that balance immediately. I have been lobbied by a number of former part-time Reserve officers. One lady, who wishes to remain anonymous, wrote to me. I want to read a couple of words of what she wrote. She said:

"The payment is made in recognition of the particular circumstances of those who volunteered to serve the Police Part-Time Reserve, making themselves vulnerable within the community for the safety of others, with the accompanying risks and the demonstration of civic spirit which that volunteering exhibited."

The money owed should be a reflection of the exceptional sacrifices that those people have made for us. That has evidently not been the case. Tax and National Insurance have been taken out of the gratuity payments, and I agree that it is totally unacceptable that the gratuity package has been taxed. The only winner in this scenario is the Treasury. It seems that this is an entirely wrong way in which to thank members of the part-time Reserve for the service that they have given to Ulster.

They have been let down by the security breach by the Department of Justice. I believe that the Minister must take responsibility for that in some capacity. I acknowledge that the Minister has established a helpline, initiated an urgent security assessment and instigated a review on how it happened. However, I call for much stronger action to be taken. The Minister ought to know exactly who is responsible for the incident and take the relevant action as a matter of urgency. The people affected and the general public must know that something on this scale will not go unnoticed and unpunished. I propose that the official in question be dealt with immediately to reassure us all that the Department is truly conscious of the gravity of the matter.

Anyone who came into contact with the envelopes in question now knows that someone at that address has connections with the RUC Reserve. Has the Minister considered reintroducing the special purchase of evacuated dwellings (SPED) scheme for those people? Is there provision and adequate reserves in his budget to ensure that if the lives of the people affected are brought under risk as a result of the blunder, they can be rehomed and assured that their safety is taken care of? It was a colossal error, and I believe that it must be dealt with as quickly as possible and taken as seriously as possible.

To sum up, I will talk about the people who have been let down. Fifty-three part-time officers died as a result of terrorist activity; 13 former part-time officers were murdered; and a further six died as a result of road traffic accidents or terrorist incidents when they were off duty. That is a total of 72. Those murdered on duty represent one in six of the losses of the RUC, and those who were murdered after they left the force represent over half the losses. Her Majesty's Government do not hold any record of the number of part-time officers who were

intimidated from their civilian employment or from their service with the RUC, but we can assume that there were many. From 1970 to 2004, 59 are recorded as having been medically retired as a result of injury on duty. One would assume that, having been retired through injury on duty, the officer would immediately qualify for the award of a police pension. A specific ruling was available under the RUC code.

Who let those heroes down? That is what we have to ask. Who dropped the ball in the Department of Justice that brought about this blunder? I ask the Minister to address those issues. I support the motion.

Lord Morrow: I want to make a few comments. I commend the movers of the motion for bringing it to the House and those who secured the £20 million way back during the Hillsborough talks. There was no doubt whatsoever that it was intended that the money, in its entirety, would go to the officers and that it would not be subjected to the rigours of the taxman. However, we have discovered that the taxman is definitely always waiting.

We have also been reassured today by Mr Dickson in particular that the Minister's hands are perfectly clean and that he has played a clean part in the events. I will take him at his word. However, the Minister could do something about a matter that, up until now, he has been emphatic that he will not do, but I would like to hear him use a different tone here today. Some people missed the opportunity to put in a claim, for real and legitimate reasons.

I ask the Minister, in the cold light of day following this debate, whether he is prepared to reconsider his position. I know the position that he has taken. Would he be prepared, in light of what has been and what will be said, to reconsider his position and give due consideration to those who genuinely missed putting in their application? I am aware of some — not many — who were left out and should be included.

4.30 pm

I understand that approximately 6,000 members will get a distribution of £20 million, which, at a quick calculation, is about £3,500 each, less tax. That is hardly a large sum of money by anybody's standards. However, it took the taste out of it when the Government stepped in and said that they would have their

clawback and their share of all the endeavours that those people had done over the years. Let it be said that the RUC Reserve and the RUC stood between sanity and insanity in this country and that there are many people alive today who would not be but for their endeavours and efforts.

I think that Mr McCartney's comments were in very bad taste. Here is a party that tells us that it is concerned about human rights and rights generally, whether they agree or disagree with them. However, they could not extend that concern today to the RUC Reserve GC. That is in sharp contrast to the SDLP's attitude. It took a constructive approach to the whole thing and said that it was prepared to support the sentiments expressed in the motion and would not seek to divide the House. I welcome that.

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

The real challenge for the Minister is to look again at the situation, give some reassurance to those who have not benefited and look at the extent to which the taxman will have a go at those who will. Because of the discrepancies and errors that have been made, the House should give that due consideration today and send out a forceful message, united as one voice, recognising that this award is most deserving. This is a gratuity payment. This is recognition of work and deeds done on behalf of this country and all its citizens, even those who did not agree with the RUC Reserve. The SDLP has been generous enough to acknowledge that in its Members' comments this afternoon. If this House sent out a united voice, the Minister and government in general should reconsider their position.

The Minister may not be able to do that, as Mr Dickson has said. His hands may be tied in relation to what the taxman has or has not done. However, there are some things about which his hands are not tied. He should acknowledge that, bring those things to the House today and say that he is prepared to give due consideration again, in particular, to those who missed out on the application.

Mr Allister: There are few sections of our society to whom we owe more than the police reservists, many of whom paid with their life for daring to defend law and order. I think today of the first member of the security forces killed in Ballymena, Mr Lamont, a reservist. I think of other gallant men, such as Eric Lutton,

butchered by wicked, evil terrorists. I then think of the survivors who gave so many years service and who get treated in the manner that they have been, in the nature, the extent and the administration of this gratuity.

For me, there are three issues: the appalling taxation issue; the appalling administration, which missed a third of potential applicants; and the appalling security breach. I will deal with them in that order. This was a negotiation that the DUP likes to claim much credit for. If it claims credit for it, it must equally accept that it botched it. The offer of £20 million was made in a letter to Peter Robinson in October 2009 in the run-up to the Hillsborough negotiations, where, it tells us, it had all sorts of leverage. It took its eyes right off the ball, and, instead of checking, double-checking and making absolutely sure that, like the previous gratuity for the UDR, this was going to be tax-free, it never bothered. If it did bother, it accepted that the gratuity would be taxed, such was its urgency to do the nefarious deal that it did with the former IRA party, Sinn Féin.

So, that was a negotiation botched. If the political leverage that was there had been applied, we would not be talking about the taxation. That should be an embarrassment to every politician. Effectively, any Member of this House, the House of Commons or the European Parliament who quits their office or is not returned gets a gratuity, of which the first £30,000 is tax-free. Yet here we have men who sacrificed beyond description. One of them spoke to me last week. He had served for over 30 years, but he got a cheque for less than £5,000, which is £3 a week.

Then we find that an inflexible, rigid, uncaring, unfeeling arrangement for the application meant that only two thirds of those who were eligible ever got the money. Although I commend the Member for moving the motion, I regret that he did not include this portion. It speaks for itself. If only 66% of those eligible applied, there was something drastically wrong with the advertising process that drew it to the public's attention. No one has to elaborate on that point, yet there has been a rigid refusal to deal with it. On that, I condemn the Minister for his inflexibility. He was more than happy to see deadlines pass, time after time, when it came to decommissioning, but he sticks rigidly to a deadline that shuts out those who sacrificed in the police Reserve.

I condemn the Minister for that, and I condemn him and his Department for the incredibly shambolic arrangements that gave rise to the security risk that has been posed to so many. The Minister tells us that his departmental officials told him that they could not write out to everyone who they thought might have been in the Reserve, even though they held their addresses, because there was a security risk. However, they can send out cheques and letters that compound that security risk. The manner in which this thing has been treated is quite appalling, and the Department has much to answer for.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Allister: In passing the motion, we do not just pass it: we look for action from the Department, and I look for those who have been closed out to be given their share of the money yet.

Mr Weir: I speak towards the end of the debate. Unlike other Members, I do not have the police connections or any degree of personal connection, save that I grew up through the Troubles. I grew up in an area that, although not untouched by the Troubles, was largely regarded as one of the safer areas in Northern Ireland. I owe my opportunity to live a relatively peaceful life throughout most of that time to the bravery of the security forces: the UDR, the RUC, the British Army and the reservists. From that point of view, I commend the motion, because that recognition has been long overdue. Some of those brave men and women paid the supreme sacrifice through their actions, but all of them sacrificed through their families. As a result of their sacrifices, I was able to sleep safely in my bed at night. They held the line against terrorism for many years.

There is one element in what Mr Allister said that I can perhaps agree with: there are three issues to this. First, it is right that we acknowledge that it is worthwhile that at least there has been some recognition, albeit belated. For many years, the issue was ignored. Despite high levels of lobbying, successive Ministers simply turned a blind eye to it, but, through the work of reservists and through the position that was agreed at Hillsborough, we finally got some level of recognition.

I will turn to the imperfect elements of the issue in a moment, but at least something was achieved. Therefore, I take grave exception

to Members who in no circumstances would have given a penny to the reservists and to the criticism from the Member who spoke previously. This recognition occurred only because of the negotiations that took place at Hillsborough. The Member who spoke previously berates this party, but, if we had followed his advice, we would not be talking about £20 million; there would not be one penny for the reservists. There would not be a single bit of recognition, so I will not take any lectures from the Member opposite.

Mr Allister: You took your eye off the ball.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to address his remarks through the Chair.

Mr Weir: We are accused of taking our eye off the ball, but the reality is that the Member was not even on the field to look at the ball, let alone do anything of that nature. There are two main issues that I support. I welcome the motion that has been proposed and the support and indication of the more mature attitude that has come from the SDLP today.

As has been indicated, there has been a major breach of security, and I believe that it was entirely foreseeable. Mr Copeland talked about the memories of the past being dragged up for many reservists. However, it is not just the memories of the past but the fear of the future, namely that somehow the information could get into the hands of dissidents and, yet again, make people vulnerable.

Although I am sure that the Minister will tell us of the steps that he has taken, there must be people in the Department who are directly culpable for this gross negligence. I am not normally someone who seeks his pound of flesh, but I would like to hear from the Minister not simply apologies or announcements of investigations but about actions against those individuals to make them culpable for the appalling mess that they have created.

Finally, there is the issue of the taxation of the gratuity, which is clearly not what was agreed. At times, the Prime Minister tells us that he is a man who cherishes the Union and that the Conservative Party apparently cherishes the Union. Talk is all very well, but here is a distinct opportunity for them to give some measure of equality to those brave men and women of Northern Ireland who stood on the front line. Even at this late hour, I call on Her Majesty's

Government, through the Treasury, to reverse that decision and ensure that the money that has managed to be secured for those people is tax-free, that the National Insurance is not deducted and that the Treasury's penny-pinching attitude is reversed. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): First, I congratulate Mr Hussey and his colleagues on securing the debate, which provides me with the opportunity to set out the steps that have been taken to address the difficulties that have arisen with the scheme recently. It is a matter of real regret that the conclusion of the gratuity scheme was marred by the unhappy circumstances surrounding the issuing of letters to recipients. I and all those involved in the running of the scheme have been upset by the potential compromise of individuals' identities as serving or former reservists, and I recognise the anxiety suffered by individuals who have been in touch with the Department since receiving their letters. Therefore, let me reiterate the apology that I have already made to those affected.

I am also pleased to be able to use this opportunity, as many others have during the debate, to underline the importance of recognising the service of the part-time Reserve. There have been difficulties with the administration of the scheme at its closing stages. There have also been disagreements about the terms of the scheme, which was passed to me by the Minister of State in the Northern Ireland Office, but there has effectively been no disagreement about the service that the part-time Reserve has given, the risks that reservists faced or the sacrifices that they made, including the 72 people, who, as has been said, made the ultimate sacrifice. They faced a disproportionate risk because they continued to live and work in the communities they served as part-time officers. Jim Wells, in particular, gave a very graphic example of that.

4.45 pm

Receiving a payment from the scheme is not intended to be in itself the measure of the community's appreciation of an officer's service. It would be easy in those circumstances to feel that the sum was derisory. Even though the payments were graduated and given a monetary value, it was never the intention that they should equate to a certain number of days' or weeks'

work. That sort of example has been unhelpful this afternoon. Rather, in setting aside the substantial sum of money to make ex gratia payments to these officers, it is intended that the part-time Reserve is given some meaningful recognition of the service that it has provided.

Discussion during the debate centred on the two main issues of tax and National Insurance and the security breach. Let me deal with some of the points that individuals made. It was always the case that the scheme, when it was presented to the Department of Justice, mentioned the payment of tax and National Insurance and that standard rules had to be applied by HMRC. In that sense, it has been suggested that administrative mistakes were made in the Department of Justice. They were not. The rules that were laid down by HMRC were imposed. It had been suggested that no effort was made to change that. Having personally written to the Chancellor after officials had failed with the Treasury and having then spoken to the Chancellor on a visit to Northern Ireland and made the case, I do not accept that anything more could have been done by the Department of Justice to deal with the case that was presented to it on devolution by the Northern Ireland Office.

Mr Wells: I am confused. The UDR payments came without any tax or National Insurance liability. As Mr Allister mentioned, someone who leaves their employment can take a gratuity of up to £30,000 with no tax or National Insurance deducted. The vast majority of these payments — perhaps all of them — were less than £30,000. Why could they not have been treated in a similar way to payments to any normal employee?

Mr Ford: I am no expert in tax law to advise Mr Wells in that respect. My understanding of the analogy of the £30,000 is that it is effectively dealt with as one of the redundancy payments when there is an allowance that is not taxable.

Mr S Anderson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: Give me a second to finish this point.

The specific points were explored, and we were told that there was no alternative but to have tax and National Insurance payments deducted. I am not aware of the precise circumstances of the payment to the Ulster Defence Regiment. I am aware that officials went through great detail with HMRC, I then followed up with the

Chancellor, and we got no alternative to the rules requiring tax and insurance applying to payments made from the £20 million.

Mr S Anderson: I thank the Minister for giving way. Did the Department in fact seek advice from tax experts on how the scheme should be taxed?

Mr Ford: Yes, of course we sought advice. Indeed, there was ongoing discussion with HMRC, which was then followed up politically by me with the Chancellor, to seek to deal with the issue in a way that would meet the concerns of reservists who felt that they were not getting a fair deal. The reality was that we tried everything that we could, but we were unable to get the Treasury to change its collective mind. Therefore, the only option we had was to work within the guidelines that were laid down.

It may well be shabby. That word resonated around the Chamber this afternoon, when Mr Maginness described the behaviour of the Treasury as such. That does not alter the fact that it is applying the law as it applies to tax, and the Department of Justice had no alternative but to follow that. Regardless of whether or not Members want that to have happened and whether or not Members are baffled by it, that is the reality. Considerable effort was put into dealing with the issue, and it was unsuccessful because of an unwillingness on the part of the Chancellor to go beyond the £20 million as the overall gross payment subject to tax and National Insurance.

Mr Hussey: Will the Minister advise the House whether he asked the Chancellor if he would be prepared to treat this as an exceptional payment? The Chancellor would have had the authority, as I am sure the Minister is aware, to create this as an exceptional payment. He has, in the past, acted as other Chancellors have acted. Was the Chancellor specifically asked to treat this as an exceptional payment?

Mr Ford: I am not sure of the precise term; Mr Hussey refers to "exceptional payment". I made very clear to the Chancellor, both in writing and in personal representation, the feeling of annoyance that was being created; the comparisons that were being made, particularly with the Ulster Defence Regiment gratuity; and the strong feeling that there would be a considerable benefit were he to increase the amount payable in order that tax could be paid. He took no notice of those representations.

Mr Hussey: Will the Minister give way again?

Mr Ford: Very briefly.

Mr Hussey: I will be very brief. The Chancellor could have treated that as an exceptional payment. You are, of course, aware of the exceptional circumstances that applied to the Northern Ireland Civil Service and the Royal Irish Regiment, whereby the employers paid the tax and National Insurance and actually did a deal with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. I am sure that they did not pay the full tax and National Insurance, but they paid an amount towards it and made a deal. That issue was raised with your Department. Where did we go with that negotiation?

Mr Ford: I am sorry, but my understanding is that tax and National Insurance were paid at the full rate. I know that comparisons are being made about the percentage that was deducted. One of the difficulties is that, because of the way in which the payment was made, a large number of people had 40% tax deducted from their payment, but they have been given a form to reclaim that. Unfortunately, there was no other way to deal with that. The most helpful thing that could be done was to advise people on making the claim.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ford: I am sorry; I have been giving way for a considerable period and have other issues that I wish to cover.

Of more concern than the tax and National Insurance issue is the security issue. From the very beginning, Mr Hussey said that there should have been full confidential cover in the way in which those communications were sent out. Clearly, that should have been the case. However, a number of Members, starting with Mr Anderson, made references to blunders by officials from the Department of Justice. In defence of those who work for me in the Department, I want to make it clear that no official from the Department of Justice was responsible for putting letters into envelopes, windowed or otherwise. The matter was dealt with by the Police Fund, which has, as the name suggests, significant links to the police and which one would expect to be — it normally is — fully cognisant of security issues. It was acting as an agent for the Department, and, in that respect, I accept responsibility for what was done. However, those who wish to criticise really

would do better than to criticise the generality of civil servants in the Department of Justice, who were not responsible for that issue. Clearly, there was a very significant administrative blunder that caused considerable concern, but that blunder was not made by the Department. What we now need to do is to seek to address it. I take entirely Conall McDevitt's point that the duty of care means that an apology is not enough. We need to see how we are addressing that.

Let me return briefly to some of the other points about the issues of take-up and tax, particularly those made by Lord Morrow and Mr Allister. The estimate I was given was that there would be in the region of 7,400 potential applicants: those who had served, had not been dismissed for misconduct and had not passed away. In practice, we got 6,200 applications. That is not, therefore, 66% but something more equating to 84%, and it is, in fact, more than double the number estimated by the part-time Reserve welfare group. I believe that that was a fairly reasonable take-up. Issues were raised about the security of writing out to people, which clearly created some difficulties. However, we had to split the £20 million among the eligible applicants, based loosely on their length of service, so there had to be a cut-off date for applications. Therefore, the suggestion that we should have kept the scheme open for ever simply was not possible. That is why I do not believe that the suggestions made by Lord Morrow and Mr Allister are possible. There had to be a date on which applications for the scheme closed. Indeed, extensions were granted to allow people to get their application in order, but there had to be a cut-off date to ensure that we got the details right.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ford: Very briefly.

Mr Allister: On the point about the figure of 9,400, I hold in my hand a letter from an official from the Department of Justice that says that the figure was 9,400 and that the percentage of applicants was 66%. On the point that you had a set figure of £20 million to be divided among the number of applicants, you charged 40% tax, and there is now going to be a refund to many members. Where is that refunded money going? Why can it not be used for those who have missed out thus far?

Mr Ford: Those from whom 40% tax was deducted and who were liable to pay only 20%

or, indeed, no tax, would expect to get the refund to which they are entitled.

The Minister and the Department made the arrangements, which may or may not be regarded as shambolic. Mr Allister may wish to raise issues with the DUP about the negotiation of those arrangements, in which I had no part. I want to address the key issue, which Ross Hussey started with and others raised, about the actions that have been taken by the Department.

In response to the reported security breach, I instituted a number of immediate actions on Monday 22 August 2011. I am happy to give details to the Assembly. First, I sought an urgent assessment of the security implications of the breach and made it clear that, if that required action for any individual, as well as the general assessment, that action would be taken. The Department set up a phone line that was in operation that morning for recipients of gratuity letters who had concerns about their security. The Department is responding directly to those individuals and to others who have written to or e-mailed it. There were also complaints that the Police Fund was unable to respond to all the queries that it received; therefore the Department sent staff to assist the Police Fund in dealing with the work that has been created there. That has included, for example, issues such as the backlog in dealing with phone messages and issues that arose when, due to banking problems, payments were not made correctly.

As to the security threat, we have advised that anyone who believes that they are under specific threat should contact their area commander. I have also initiated an investigation into the breach of normal practice in respect of the security of those 6,000 individuals. I want to understand the decisions that led to that outcome and how those decisions were reached.

To date, 156 people have called the telephone helpline; nine have e-mailed; and nine have written to the Department. On Tuesday 6 September 2011, the Department wrote to all those who had contacted it in order to explain progress in the security assessment. Mr McIlveen mentioned the SPED scheme, which is open to anyone who has security concerns that are substantiated by the Police Service. The vast majority of those 156 people raised concerns that related to issues in the past. Relatively few have raised concerns about issues of today. I

appreciate fully that that does not lessen the anxiety of some of those reservists, which many Members expressed in the debate. Their anxiety needs to be taken into account. We need to do what we can to reassure those reservists because, however small that proportion is, it is creating difficulty for them. We will seek to continue that work to support those who feel particular difficulties and ensure that a proper individual assessment is carried out by the Police Service. If measures such as SPED are appropriate, they will be taken.

The investigation that I initiated on 22 August is nearing completion. I have had a preliminary briefing from the departmental security officer. I want to offer reassurance that the Police Fund recognises the need for appropriate security measures. Members have called for action to be taken against those whom they see as responsible. However, I trust that no Member would expect action to be taken without the due process that is being followed through seriously. Let me reiterate that, just as others have paid tribute to those who served in the part-time Reserve, it is important that we as a House commend them collectively for the circumstances in which they stepped up to protect the community.

Mr B McCrea: I am privileged to make the winding-up speech. I pay tribute to my colleague Mr Ross Hussey, who was instrumental in bringing the debate before the House. I also acknowledge — I hope that it is in order — that others, some of whom are present in the Gallery and some, no doubt, listening to the debate on the internet, will have profound interest in the issue. I pay tribute to them, too, for their sterling service. I hope that at least some comments that have been made in the Chamber will have been to their satisfaction.

5.00 pm

Many Members spoke eloquently about the contribution of the part-time Reserve. By their very nature, they lived in the community, often in dangerous situations. As Mr Hussey said, many of those, some of whom were murdered, did so after they resigned. That brings into perspective the disproportionate nature of the penalty that those brave men and women suffered for trying to do what they thought was right for all of us.

Sydney Anderson mentioned the fact that Mr Hussey had been involved in this. I also note that David McIlveen quoted his statistics from a paper that was prepared by Mr Hussey and his colleagues.

When is a gratuity not a gratuity? The answer is of course: when you take 40% of it away. Society has to decide whether to put the past behind us and deal with those issues properly. If so, being mean about a situation absolutely undermines the intent behind what you are trying to do. If you give money to people, you should not take it back. Several Members raised that point.

The challenge was thrown down by Mr Weir about calling on the Government to deal with this issue, and I support that. I hope — no doubt there will be a few comments about this — that his party's MPs will bring up the issue at Westminster too. This is something that we can deal with collectively.

The next issue is the security breach. One of the Minister's endearing attributes is that he is mildly spoken and brings calm to these issues sometimes; however, had this happened five, 10 or 15 years ago, the palpable sense of outrage and complete disbelief that we could send out papers identifying part-time RUC reservists would have brought the Government down. It is a serious issue. Although the Minister said that he would look at this, I do not think that we have yet found a way of addressing it. Make no mistake: it shakes the very foundation of what we are trying to do that we cannot find a way of delivering the post to those who have served us so loyally in the past. We have to address that.

If he gives me latitude, I will mention Mr Copeland, who started his address by saying that he wanted to give no offence. I will try to give no offence on this issue, but there are a few points that need to be said in an appropriate way for the record. Mr Copeland graphically described the difficulties facing people. It brought home to those of us who were not in the RUC or the part-time Reserve, as Mr Weir acknowledged, just what it was like to live under those conditions.

I will note, without the histrionics of some others, that when we claim victory for a negotiation it is disappointing if we do not quite get the outcome that we want. Therefore, rather than taking any particular blame or pointing fingers, we must all try to avoid making a mistake and see if we can get restitution.

I repeat that I expect to see a concerted effort from the colleagues to my left to see whether we can address the injustice of the gratuity being taxed.

I saw Members from Sinn Féin shaking their heads at some of the things that I said, and I

am disappointed by their approach. In recent days and weeks, I heard the attack that Members of that party launched against the Police Ombudsman, telling him about the things that were not done correctly. They questioned how we are to move forward if we cannot deal with the past and why we cannot deal with the issues. I also note that party's recent ard fheis, which was an interesting exercise in people talking about moving forward. Those of my colleagues who are not content with the motion are missing an opportunity. If they are serious about moving forward, we must find a way of dealing with the past. Simply demonising those who carried out a reasonable and proper defence of the people who they believed they were serving, does no one any justice.

Mr Hussey: My colleague referred to those who demonise those who served in the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Colleagues of mine are here today, one of whom was present at the Enniskillen bomb and who still has a blood-stained uniform in his wardrobe. That memory will haunt him for the rest of his days. As an 18-year-old part-time police officer, I saw the body of a colleague and that picture will be in my head until the day that I die. There is a lady here today, who, as a part-time police officer, continually had to go the homes of murdered officers and stay with their wives while the bodies were attended to. Those nightmares are always there, and, in some of the cases that I referred to, flashbacks are coming back to those concerned because some idiot could not put a letter into a plain brown envelope and post it out. An idiot did that, and someone's head should roll. There are people here today who suffer from nightmares because of that incompetence.

Mr B McCrea: I thank Mr Hussey for his intervention and for putting his point more eloquently than I could.

As I move to the conclusion of my contribution, I quote the Minister's own words back to him: "an apology is not enough". We need to find a way of addressing that issue. The issue of whether the Chancellor or the NIO was responsible for the decision to tax the gratuity is water under the bridge. What matters now is how we try to address this issue. The Minister said that the Department of Justice was not responsible for the security breach, but someone was responsible, and people should stand up and take responsibility for their actions.

In conclusion, my mother's father was in the RUC, and, all of my life, I have taken pride in the actions of its part-time and full-time members. I commend them, and I commend the motion to the House. I hope that it will be agreed unanimously.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 54; Noes 23

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Attwood, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Byrne, Mr T Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mrs Lewis, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McQuillan, Mr A Maginness, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Hussey and Mr Kinahan.

NOES

Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr W Clarke, Mr Flanagan, Ms Gildernew, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr F McCann and Ms S Ramsey.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with regret the deduction of National Insurance and income tax from the £20 million part-time Reserve gratuity scheme; expresses concern at the security breach which put the identity and well-being of around 6,000 former part-time RUC officers at risk; and calls on the Minister of Justice to make a statement on the matter and detail what action has been taken in light of the security breach.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Belfast City Hospital: Closure of Accident and Emergency Unit

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic for debate will have 15 minutes. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will have 10 minutes to respond. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately seven minutes.

Mr McDevitt: The House will be glad to hear that I do not intend to take my 15 minutes. However, I do not believe that the provision is there for me to allow anyone else to use it up.

Belfast City Hospital has served the community of Belfast city for some considerable time. Its accident and emergency unit has been an integral part of the fabric of the south inner city and university districts as well as many of the suburban areas in the greater south Belfast area. It has provided service in an impartial and fair way, and is seen as a local hospital to that particular community.

We live in an era in which we all must be attentive to the need to deliver a better type of health service and in which we must ensure that it is delivered to better standards than would, historically, have been the case. I do not think that anyone would really argue with that point.

However, what has caused so many people in South Belfast to be very concerned is the manner in which events unfolded over the summer. We first heard that the Department was thinking about launching a consultation about the possible future of A&E services at Belfast City Hospital, a piece of news that came as a surprise owing to its timing. Why? Simply because it has always been understood that any future change to A&E services across the city of Belfast would occur only when the critical care facility came online at the Royal Victoria Hospital. The Minister rightly reminds us that that facility is still some considerable way off completion.

Last week, matters took a considerable turn for the worse, with a decision taken on, we are

told, clinical grounds by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust to close A&E services as of 1 November because, in its words, it cannot guarantee adequate clinical cover to ensure that services continue to the standards acceptable to modern regulatory codes. That decision begs a question, and some of the debate unfolded following the Minister's statement in the House earlier: how come a crisis emerged when we have known about the problem for so long? How come we have had a decision foisted on us on clinical grounds when the problem has been known about for so long?

The big issue that people have with this series of events is that no one is trying to say that things will be better after 1 November. What we do know for a fact is that there will be fewer A&E beds in Belfast city on 1 November than there are today. We also know for a fact that the facilities at the Royal Victoria Hospital are temporary and that, to try to mitigate the impact of the closure at the City Hospital, more temporary facilities will be added to the Royal. When winter really digs in, and the inevitable occurs — seasonal flu, winter vomiting and other unavoidable winter illnesses — where will the capacity come from to accommodate them? The only thing that we know about all this is that the capacity will not be there.

It is my view, and possibly that of many of us who represent South Belfast, irrespective of party allegiance, that the decision was entirely premature — it was made before its time — and that the crisis decision taken by the trust on clinical grounds was entirely foreseeable. The Minister must, therefore, commit to trying to restore proper clinical standards at Belfast City Hospital A&E as a matter of urgency, and he must guarantee the House and the people of our city that no significant or policy decisions will be taken about the future of A&E until such a time as the critical care facility comes online at the Royal Victoria Hospital, because anything short of that will inevitably lead to fewer resources being available to meet the needs of the city.

I am aware of the points that the Minister makes about the recruitment of doctors. I have sympathy for those professionals at trust level who are struggling to meet that need. However, forgive me a moment of cynicism: it is an exceptionally convenient turn of events that several weeks after the Minister told us that he was minded to do something, the clinical

need to do it emerges. Once the clinical need is there, the event happens. The cynics will ask what chance is there that the Minister's proposed consultation will be able to be conducted in a free, unfettered and objective way.

5.30 pm

Before it all becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, my call, and that of the SDLP in south Belfast, is that we step back from allowing the inevitable to happen and look at ensuring that the facilities that are at Belfast City Hospital A&E are properly staffed and resourced until such time as the Royal Victoria Hospital is able to absorb the extra capacity that will arise.

Mr Spratt: I, too, will not take too long. I thank my colleague from South Belfast Conall McDevitt for securing this Adjournment debate. It comes after the Minister made a fairly lengthy statement; perhaps many of the points were covered already in that statement. I accept that there needs to be changes in accident and emergency. Some difficult decisions have to be made about health, particularly when you look at the number of accident and emergency departments. We all strive and hope for a centre of excellence in the city of Belfast to cover all the citizens of Belfast, no matter which corner of the city they come from.

I accept that the trust had to make the decision for purely operational reasons such as medical cover and care, which the Minister told us about earlier. I also accept that the distances between all four accident and emergency departments, if you bring the Ulster Hospital into the scenario, are not great in comparison with the distance in other parts of the Province. It needs to be more widely explained, particularly to the residents of south Belfast, that the City Hospital is already a centre of excellence for cancer care and other specialities and is earmarked to become a centre of excellence for elective surgery. The Royal will be the centre for acute emergency care and surgery. I have asked the Minister to make sure that that message gets out to everyone.

Residents and constituents in the Donegall Road, Village and Sandy Row areas of south Belfast have safety concerns, whether they are ill-perceived or not, about going to the Royal. I am not so sure that those concerns are justified, so some reassurance needs to be given to people in that regard. Those of us who have to go in and out of the Royal and other hospitals from time to time have not found any major problem.

However, there is certainly that perception in certain areas of the city. That is another area of concern that needs to be addressed.

There is also the concern about the additional travelling time in going to the Royal. Again, there is work that could and should be done around that to make people understand that the extra few minutes in an ambulance or whatever means that they will go to a unit that will give them the best possible care.

Earlier, I addressed with the Minister an area about which I still have concerns. The new trauma centre at the Royal is not fully operational, and it will not be for up to two years. I have concerns about the 40,000 extra patients. I understand that the Minister has told us about minor units, and that needs to be welcomed. Anyone who has to go to an accident and emergency unit or who knows doctors who work there will know that many people arrive there who, quite frankly, should not be there. That is being addressed, and it needs to be addressed with the public by making the public more aware that other areas are open to them. Maybe if that were a bit better explained to them, fewer people would go to any of the accident and emergency units in Northern Ireland. A whole range of things needs to be done in dealing with closure and explaining clearly to folks exactly what is happening at the City. Having talked to the trade unions, I know that they understand that there will be no job losses and that the City Hospital will be running to full capacity without any reduction in staff or anything else.

In the Minister's statement earlier, he addressed the point that a number of people and organisations are persisting with the claim that the closure will put lives at risk. That is devious, dangerous and totally wrong. From whatever source they may come, those comments need to be tackled head on and regularly. All Members of the House and politicians from the area need to scupper those fears, because it is always vulnerable and elderly people who will listen to those concerns. That will give them serious cause for concern, particularly the folks who are in and out of hospital regularly. There is work to be done to reassure the public, particularly in south Belfast, on everything that is being put in place. I ask that the Department do that as soon as possible to try to allay some of the fears and reassure folks that the City Hospital will continue as a centre of excellence for medical care in Northern Ireland into the future.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for securing the debate, which has given us all an opportunity to address the issue further. I commend the Member who has just spoken, Jimmy Spratt, because Jimmy has touched on an undercurrent that, so far, has been unspoken. It is helpful to get the little elephant out of the room, which is that a lot of people in Belfast, for understandable reasons, have had what I will describe as a more comfortable feeling with going to one hospital rather than another. That feeling was in the minds of many people and with good reason. Thankfully, although we still have difficulties in our city, the situation has moved on quite considerably, and we will all welcome that very much. In the back — and maybe even at the forefront — of the minds of some people who live in south Belfast there is a fear of having to go to the Royal in what they think is west Belfast, and vice versa. From my direct experience as someone who has been in and out of hospitals quite a bit in recent years, I can understand that. However, I believe and am satisfied that the situation has improved considerably, and we will all want to welcome that. It is the responsibility of all of us to try to deal with this in as mature a way as possible, without the rhetoric, some of which Jimmy referred to.

I heard a representative on TV at the beginning of the public debate a while ago, and that person, whom I will not name, spoke for about four minutes without even mentioning patients who might need emergency care. That person spoke about everything bar the need for someone who requires emergency treatment to be able to get access to it and in very quick time.

Every one of us has at the heart of our concerns — I certainly do as a South Belfast representative, speaking specifically for that area — making sure that all the people in this city have direct and immediate access to emergency care if and when they, unfortunately, need it. That has to be paramount and uppermost in our minds. Therefore, all our concerns need to be directed at the types of contingency plans that the Minister referred to earlier and will, I presume, address again during the debate.

The capacity of other institutions to absorb an increase in attendance is of paramount importance. The decision has been taken, and the closure will happen. Whether it is temporary or otherwise is a discussion for another day. We

can be as cynical as we wish, but the decision is taken, and I want to make sure that, hand on heart, I can face my constituents and say that we have made representations to the Minister on specific issues relating to the capacity of other places to absorb the additional number of people who attend, what may happen to the workforce that currently services the City, and so on. However, the primary question is: how will the people who currently use the Belfast City Hospital facilities fare if they need to use those services in the future? That is the only issue that I want to address.

Having listened to the debate and to the Minister earlier, I too wonder about some issues. There was some discussion recently and then the announcement, which has been described as “premature”, was made. If everybody knew about it, why was nothing done sooner, rather than waiting or taking “premature” decisions? I am not entirely sure of the right way of all this, but I listened very carefully to what the Minister said earlier. If it has taken the clinicians, professionals, experts, consultants and doctors to say, “We are going no further with this”, where was the management? I do not mean in the past two weeks, because the Minister has been in post only since May or June. Where was the management over the past year or two when the problem was building up? I am not really interested in getting the answer to that today, but those are fundamental issues that need to be addressed in the longer term.

This closure has been described by the Minister as temporary. If the deficits are met, the service is stabilised and people are safe to attend hospital to get emergency care when they need it, the longer-term management of the service still has to be addressed. So I would like to think that lessons have been learned, and I presume and hope that lessons have been learned from the failure to either address or redress the difficulties that have brought us to the point where medical professionals are telling us that they are no longer prepared to stand over the situation. If medical professionals have said, “I am sorry but I am not prepared to stand over the situation any longer”, I fail to see how anybody can describe a decision as “premature”. I do not understand that. I would like to think that decisive action would have been taken and a decision made.

However, like every other representative of the constituency, I am aware, as I said when the Minister made the statement to the Assembly this afternoon, that any other set of constituency MLAs could stand here and complain about or address the issue of the closure of an A&E department in their constituency. As a South Belfast representative, my primary concern is for the safety and well-being of the constituents that I have the privilege to represent, and I was satisfied, perhaps considerably so, by the Minister's responses earlier.

It is important to continue to make sure that the public hear as often and as clearly as possible what the contingency plans are; what measures are in place; and what responsible actions the public can take, which the Minister referred to on occasions, to reduce the pressure on A&Es, no matter where they are. I wish the Minister well in his task of convincing the public that the service that they will rely on will be safe and secure.

5.45 pm

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

Mr A Maskey: I hope that the public in south Belfast, or anywhere else, can look forward in the longer term to having safe and secure services.

Mr McGimpsey: I am grateful to Mr McDevitt for securing the debate. It is on an issue which, as Mr Spratt said, is causing serious concerns in south Belfast. It is a controversial decision. The A&E at the City Hospital is closing. It is an A&E that currently accommodates 42,000 visits a year; that is virtually 1,000 a week. We are on the cusp of winter pressures, and, as the weather gets colder, we will see a dramatic increase in the number of visits to all of our A&Es — not just for orthopaedic services but also by our elderly population and because of flu-related symptoms and so on. This is exactly the time of the year when we look to our A&Es to perform at their best.

We are all aware that, as far as Belfast is concerned, we have the Royal, Mater and City hospitals. The Mater accommodates 40,000 visits a year and the Royal around 70,000. The Royal is clearly our major A&E. The strategy for the health service was begun by Mr Maskey's party, Sinn Féin, under Developing Better Services. It is useful to remember what

Developing Better Services said, because that is the strategy that we have been following. Had capital funds and investment been available properly, as they should have been over the years, we would be much further on in developing that strategy, which was for a major new critical-care building at the Royal. I was personally pleased, as Minister, to go forward with that at a cost of, I think, £190 million. That will provide a brand new accident and emergency, intensive care, and acute surgery facilities — all that we would expect from a modern, up-to-date regional centre for A&E. That is now two years away from completion of its four-year build.

Under the strategy, it was always envisaged that the Mater would be a local hospital. Local hospitals have minor-injuries units, but, as an enhanced local hospital, the Mater would have certain other extras, not least ophthalmology services. That the Mater would have a minor-injuries service was laid down with Sinn Féin's signature very much underneath it.

The City Hospital would be a major acute hospital, a teaching hospital with an A&E. It was envisaged that that A&E would or should continue until the new Royal A&E service in the critical-care unit was in operation. That is why a gap is developing here. Those 42,000 patients a year who visit the City Hospital will not be accommodated in future; therefore, there will be a gap. So, you look to see where that gap will be filled. Well, it seems to me that it will not be filled at the Ulster Hospital, because the Ulster was designed for 30,000 visits a year, and it is already handling more than 70,000.

I welcome the Minister's announcement today that the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has recruited three extra A&E consultants for the Ulster. That will certainly help the hospital's throughput, although it begs the question why we cannot recruit three extra consultants for the City Hospital as well, because the lack of middle-grade doctors appears to be the problem or the issue here. That would allow, as was always envisaged, the City Hospital A&E to continue until the Royal has the capacity to shoulder the burden. Remember that the Royal A&E unit is currently in a temporary building. The Royal A&E was demolished several years ago to make way for the critical-care unit, and it is currently housed in a large temporary metal building. It is a good

temporary building, but that is what it is — temporary.

There will be serious disruption at the A&E at the Royal when the new critical care unit is ready and we have to locate from the temporary A&E into the critical care unit. A number of issues have been in the planning, upsetting the plan, turning it upside down and causing surprise. Frankly, that is where we are coming from. Had it been the Mater going to a minor injuries unit to remove staff from the Mater to the City, that I could have understood. However, taking staff to maintain the Mater A&E, for example, knowing that the Mater A&E will be a minor injuries unit in a couple of years from now, took me by surprise.

The Ulster Hospital also requires a new A&E. As the Minister said, under the current investment strategy for Northern Ireland plan, there is so little money going into health that it is nearly nine years away. Of course, if the money were available, it could be ready within two years, as it is all set and ready to go. Those issues are of concern to the population. It is about capacity. Will there be an A&E available, and will it be able to deliver the service for patients coming through the door within the 12-hour target?

As I said, there is the issue of winter pressures. There is also an issue that relates to the Minister's earlier remarks, when he appeared to say that the General Medical Council (GMC) wrote to say that it was not going to provide support or cover for the City Hospital A&E, which, effectively, forced our hand. I need further clarification on that, and I would be concerned if that is what came from the General Medical Council. However, I will check the Hansard report to see the Minister's precise remarks. Nevertheless, I took it that the GMC was the cause of the issue, and we should not take that lightly.

There is a capacity issue and an issue of confidence. It seems to be a bad day for south Belfast. We are losing our constituency —

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

Mr McGimpsey: Yes, thank you. We are losing our constituency, and we are losing our A&E at very short notice with winter pressures coming. I need some more convincing.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the opportunity to respond to the debate in place of my party colleague Anna Lo, who represents South Belfast. Unfortunately, she is unable to be present. I also thank the Member for South Belfast Mr McDevitt for securing this important debate.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Could something be done about the PA system? There seems to be inordinate interference, which is making it difficult to hear. We all want to hear the pearls of wisdom from Mr McCarthy, but the present system is giving us deep difficulties.

Mr McCarthy: Can you not hear me, Jim?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The fact that it has been referred to will probably be picked up by our technical department and, hopefully, resolved.

Mr McCarthy: My colleague Anna Lo has met the Minister and written to the chairman of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust on the issue. It is also an issue that I am familiar with as I am a member of the Health Committee. Indeed, I questioned the Minister on the day that he announced to the Committee the decision on the A&E at the City Hospital. Given the difficult financial times, the state of the budget and the lack of practitioners and doctors etc, we realise that there is a need for a review of the health estate and that the current provision of four accident and emergency units in Belfast must be looked at. Duplication must be avoided at all costs. We must also take account of the opinion of medical professionals on adequate and safe staffing in all our health service provision. However, before steps are taken to close the A&E unit at the City Hospital, it is important that there is sufficient provision in place elsewhere to ensure that the more than 40,000 patients who will be forced to travel further will not then be subject to excessive waits elsewhere. Currently, the Royal Victoria Hospital does not have the necessary infrastructure to deal with the arrival of such a large number of extra patients a year. With only 24 A&E cubicles, it is difficult to see how it will be expected to cope with that huge rise in the number of patients.

I accept the statement made by the Minister in the House today in relation to the A&E at the City Hospital. As it stands, the Royal is finding it difficult to cope with patient levels. In June 2011, 56 patients waited over 12 hours at the Royal. The Ulster Hospital in Dundonald,

which, surely, will also see a large uplift in the number of patients visiting its A&E, as has been acknowledged already today, had 155 people wait for over 12 hours in the same month. Therefore, although there may be a financial need for rationalisation in the health service, it cannot come at a risk to patient care or even at the risk of creating lengthier waiting lists for patients because the necessary infrastructure is not in place to allow the remaining accident and emergency units to cope.

I urge the Minister to ensure that he is taking all adequate steps, such as public education campaigns, to reduce the number of people who attend accident and emergency units when their needs could be much better serviced elsewhere. I mentioned that to the Minister following his statement today. I acknowledge that the Minister answered my question on that. He advised the Assembly of his efforts to help with that issue. Currently, too many people, for one reason or another, use A&E units as an alternative to visiting their GP. They use an out-of-hours doctor or visit a minor injuries unit. If those numbers were reduced, the strain on all our A&E units would be eased significantly. I sincerely hope that that message can get out to everyone.

I call on the Minister to ensure that every effort is made to put in place sufficient upgrades in surrounding A&E units to ensure that patients do not suffer unduly from any rationalisation in the health service in Belfast.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I am grateful for the opportunity to listen to Members' comments and to respond to the important debate on the changes to Belfast City Hospital's emergency department. I have already made a comprehensive statement on the matter this afternoon, and, in the interests of time, I do not wish to repeat all that was in that statement. However, I want to reiterate a number of points and deal with some of the issues that have been raised by Members.

Let me be clear at the outset that the safety of patients is my number one concern, and I want to assure the people of south Belfast that there is and will continue to be access to appropriate emergency services for all those who need them. The urgent and necessary decision by the Belfast Trust to reconfigure the emergency department services on two sites

and alter provision in Belfast City Hospital is an operational matter that was taken in the interests of safety and sustainability of services. Those who say that people will die as a result of the decision are wrong. We are doing this to ensure that the patients are dealt with safely and appropriately and to ensure that there is proper and adequate cover at our hospitals, something that has not been the case in the past.

As I explained earlier, I am advised that the Belfast Trust considered other options, including reducing the opening hours of the City Hospital emergency department or putting in place a minor injuries unit. It must also be remembered that the Royal site is the regional trauma unit for Northern Ireland.

The changes, as proposed, are not to take place until 1 November 2011, but that does not mean that acute admissions to Belfast City Hospital will stop. The model being designed for Belfast City Hospital, although it still needs some refinement, will see acute admissions to the hospital through a medical admissions unit and an acute assessment facility. Patient pathways will also be in place for certain specialty admissions.

6.00 pm

It should also be said that the future of Belfast City Hospital is not under threat as a result of the removal of emergency services at this time because of urgent requirements. The hospital provides a superb service, particularly in urology and nephrology, and is the regional cancer centre for Northern Ireland. One of the first things that I did as Minister was to propose further investment in the hospital through new lines for the radiotherapy unit in association with the proposal to develop the cancer centre at Altnagelvin Hospital. So, I am committed to ensuring that the Belfast City Hospital remains and remains as a teaching facility.

I will deal with the issue that Mr McGimpsey raised regarding the GMC. The GMC did threaten very clearly to withdraw teaching status on the back of the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency (NIMDTA) report produced in June. The August response was a response —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: I will give way.

The August response was a response to the report produced in June by NIMDTA. This was not some cynical, stage-managed exercise. It was the GMC's response to a NIMDTA report that gave the Belfast City Hospital and Royal Victoria sites F grades.

Mr McDevitt: I thank the Minister for giving way. I think that that is an important point that we all need clarity on. I have just heard the Minister say that the GMC threatened to withdraw the teaching status of the hospital. Earlier, I certainly got the impression that the Minister was saying that the GMC was threatening to withdraw medical cover. I welcome that clarification. I am sure that lots of people will do so.

Mr Poots: The GMC has considerable concern about the status of the junior doctors. It wants to ensure that they have adequate training, supervision and professional oversight. That is for two reasons: for training purposes and to ensure that junior doctors are not making decisions that they should not be making and that others are making those key life-and-death decisions. It is inappropriate to put junior doctors in a position in which they are making life-and-death decisions without having had the proper opportunity to have adequate training to make those decisions.

I also acknowledge that the south Belfast people who present themselves to an emergency department will have to do so at either the Royal or the Mater hospitals. Mr Spratt and Mr Maskey made the point that there are people in south Belfast who feel a little uncomfortable going to west Belfast. That should not be the case. Our hospitals should be neutral venues. However, Northern Ireland is an unusual place in many respects, and we still have throwbacks to the period of the Troubles.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister comment on the fact that the Mater Hospital is used equally by residents of the Shankill, the Crumlin Road, Ligoniel and Glengormley with no difficulty whatsoever? That seems to indicate a model by which all our hospitals in Northern Ireland could be seen as neutral spaces that everyone can use safely.

Mr Poots: That is the case. The Mater Hospital is used extensively by both sides of the community.

I understand why people in the Village and Sandy Row may feel a little uncomfortable about

going to the Royal. I have used the emergency department in the Royal. I have sat there for many hours with my disabled brother, and, as would normally be the case, I did not have any problems. Perhaps the fear that some members of the public have is misplaced. There are alternatives, of course. There are other sites that people can go to, including the Ulster Hospital site and the Mater, if they feel uncomfortable about visiting an emergency department in a particular area but need care. However, we have to get to a point where people can overcome those issues and problems. That should not be an issue that clouds our decision-making. Belfast City Council has something like 13 leisure centres because people will not cross boundaries, and that has added a huge cost to that council.

I note that the driving distance from the City Hospital to the Royal Hospital is 1.2 miles and from the City Hospital to the Mater Hospital the driving distance is 2.1 miles. That causes a further inconvenience for some people in south Belfast, but it has to be balanced against the need, which is far greater, to have safe, high-quality services with better access to senior doctors and greater supervision of junior doctors, especially out of hours and at weekends.

It is my understanding that there will be no staff reductions, which is a very important issue for the trade unions, but there will be a requirement for staff reconfiguration. The trust has discussed those changes with relevant staff and will continue to do so.

There will also be full communication with the public, other trusts and GPs on those temporary changes, and that will be done through a number of mechanisms. Advertisements will be put up in GP surgeries, pharmacies, post offices and our universities. The promotion of relevant information will be done through all appropriate media and press outlets. The changes will be promoted to the media through organisational advocates who will be mandated to explain the necessity for the changes and their value to patients. There will be extensive public advertisement of the changes in the run-up to the date of the service transfer; provision of relevant information through trust, board and other suitably accessible website facilities; and sharing of information with key interest groups, such as elected representatives, trade unions and other stakeholder interests, including GPs, through an ongoing programme of meetings.

I assure you that the changes will be closely monitored by the Belfast Trust, the HSC Board and me. Members will have gathered from the discussion that took place earlier today and, indeed, from this debate that this was coming and has been coming for some time. There have been evident signs that that was the case. I pose this question to the House: how was it that the Ulster Hospital was in a position to recruit three additional consultants to that facility and the City Hospital was not in a position to ensure that there was adequate cover of registrars and consultants to maintain the service there? I suspect that, if people were concerned about the City Hospital, perhaps they took their eye off the ball when they had the opportunity to ensure that the situation that I was given was not better for the Belfast City Hospital emergency department.

In the longer term, we have a strategic decision to make on the provision of emergency department services in the greater Belfast area. I reassure the people of Belfast and, in particular, those who live in south Belfast that I will not make any permanent decision without a full and open process of consultation and engagement. Consultation on these matters is likely to happen early in the new year, and, following careful consideration of those consultation responses, I anticipate taking a strategic decision on them later in 2012.

Adjourned at 6.09 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 19 September 2011

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Acting deputy First Minister

Mr Speaker: I wish to advise the House that I received written notice this morning from the deputy First Minister, Mr Martin McGuinness, that, under section 16A(11) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, he has designated Mr John O'Dowd, the Minister of Education, to exercise the functions of the office of deputy First Minister. The designation takes effect from midnight tonight. A copy of the letter will be available in the Business Office for Members to inspect.

On another issue, I ask Members for their help. We are experiencing some technical problems with the amplifying system in the Chamber, and Alban Maginness and Jim Wells raised the issue last Tuesday. Assembly Broadcasting is monitoring the situation to see whether it can identify the problem and rectify it. However, if Members feel that there are problems with the amplifying system, they can alert the Table or raise it as a point of order, and, hopefully, it will help the broadcasting team to identify the problem and resolve it. Therefore, I ask for Members' patience. We will move on.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to your announcement under section 16A, can you advise the House whether the deputy First Minister will be paid as such while he pursues his project of foreign adventurism?

Mr Speaker: Order. That is not a matter for the Speaker. I have fulfilled my role this afternoon. I simply received a letter from the deputy First Minister, which was very clear and procedurally correct, and I am informing the House of that this afternoon. That is where my role ends. I am sure that the educated Member will know that as well. We shall now move on.

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Environment

Mr Speaker: The Minister of the Environment wishes to make a statement to the House this afternoon.

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment):

In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, as amended by the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, I wish to make the following statement on the twelfth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in environment sectoral format, which was held in Armagh on Friday 1 July 2011. This statement has been agreed with the Minister for Regional Development, Mr Danny Kennedy, who also attended. The Irish Government were represented by Mr Phil Hogan TD, Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government, who chaired the meeting. I, as Minister of the Environment, along with Danny Kennedy MLA, Minister for Regional Development, represented the Northern Ireland Executive.

In respect of waste management, Ministers noted developments in waste policy and that the revised European waste framework directive has been transposed in both jurisdictions. The Council welcomed the work of the North/South market development steering group on three particular issues: the planned tender for a feasibility study on bulky waste reuse management best practice; the all-island end of waste/quality protocol gypsum baseline survey; and the work to be taken forward by a subgroup on the detail of mutually recognised quality protocols.

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

Ministers noted the intended publication, at that time, of an all-island recycled plastic waste

arisings study, which looks at the generation and fate of recycled plastic waste across the island of Ireland. Since agreeing this statement, the arising study was published by Mr Hogan and me at an all-Ireland environment conference at Croke Park last Thursday.

In respect of cross-border movements of waste, Ministers noted that the removal of waste from sites at Slattinagh, County Fermanagh, and near Trillick, County Tyrone, is now complete; that, when this statement was drafted, work was expected to commence — it has done so — in August on a further site in Ballymartin near Kilkeel, County Down, which I visited last Thursday; that work on a site north of Newry will commence in, I hope, early September; and that the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) will draw up plans to repatriate waste from the remaining 13 sites thereafter. The Council noted that joint enforcement actions continue to be conducted by the competent authorities.

In respect of the implementation of the EU water framework directive, Ministers noted that the joint document 'Working Together: Managing Our Shared Waters' for the north-western and Neagh/Bann international river basin districts has been completed and published on the Departments' websites. Those documents will complement the river basin management plans for each jurisdiction. The North/South working group on water quality will continue to oversee co-ordinated implementation of those plans.

The meeting also touched on environmental reporting and research. Minister Hogan and I welcomed progress by the NIEA and the Republic's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in taking forward actions including joint participation in EU-funded programmes and the sharing of research projects to support the implementation of the water framework directive obligations.

The Council welcomed co-operation in accessing funding for priority environmental research under EU framework programme (FP) 7 — the key R&D innovation research fund of the European Union, which is currently measured in the scale of €50 billion over the lifetime of the fund — INTERREG and LIFE+ programmes, including the delivery of two events focusing on information and networking for European funding leverage and the establishment of an external funding support team in NIEA to assist development of

a joint headline project with EPA. That work is ongoing.

Finally, Ministers welcomed ongoing collaborative work to develop a common set of environmental indicators, which includes a web-based approach to presentation and the publication of a short statistical bulletin. The Council agreed to meet again in environment sectoral format in October 2011.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that they must confine themselves to asking questions on the Minister's statement.

Mr Hamilton (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): I thank the Minister for his statement. Illegal dumping of waste from the Irish Republic north of the border has exercised the Committee for the Environment for some time. I welcome the progress that has been made, which the Minister mentioned in his statement. I look forward to further progress on the other 13 sites that he mentioned.

On behalf of the Committee, I ask the Minister to say a wee bit more about the joint enforcement proceedings that he touched on. Can he assure the House that the issue is now under much greater control than it was? If possible, can he quantify the financial scale of the problem and, indeed, the contribution that his Department has made to clearing it up?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Deputy Chairperson for his questions. He is quite right that the Committee has been attentive and vigilant to that particular matter. As Members know, there are 17 sites in the North of Ireland where waste has been dumped illegally. Those sites have been identified for repatriation of waste. Work has been completed on two of those sites. Work is ongoing at Ballymartin, near Kilkeel. We hope, subject to the weather and technical and legal considerations, to pursue work at the site north of Newry in the near future. Thereafter, work at the rest of the sites will be rolled out. It is a very expensive process.

I think that Anna Lo, the Chairperson of the Committee, went down to Ballymartin. The scale of the Ballymartin dump, which is not by any means the largest of the illegal dumps, would take your breath away. Indeed, as I discovered, the smell and taste of what was dumped, left rotting and is now being removed from there lingers with you for a very long time. Total

costs could be upwards of £30 million — for criminals and their gangs to get short-term benefit from dumping waste from the South. I must acknowledge that, under the framework agreement that was agreed by previous Ministers and the two Governments, the Irish Government are responsible for 80% of the removal costs and 100% of the disposal costs. That will remain the situation as long as the waste that comes out of the ground is sourced from the Republic of Ireland to the same extent. Under the framework agreement, if it happens that the amount of waste that comes out of illegal dumps passes a threshold of 20% from the North, that matter may be revisited.

I am somewhat restricted in commenting on where we might be with enforcement or potential prosecutions arising from illegal dumping, save to say that any evidence or information that emerges from sites — it may be that there are papers in the sites that betray or potentially betray information on where the illegal waste came from — is, quite properly, bagged, collected and assessed. Any information that arises is then forwarded to the Irish Government. I assure the House that, even in the past number of days, information has been forwarded to Dublin City Council to determine whether there is an opportunity to pursue prosecutions.

Finally, only in recent times — 2008 — has the Department established an environmental crime section. I have met the environmental crime section team, which is passionate and determined about the work that it undertakes. It is risky work. Its staff have to watch themselves, because they deal with criminal gangs and individuals who would want to identify people who are involved in that sort of business, for obvious reasons. Since 2008, there have been 15 confiscation orders, amounting to £1.7 million, relating to environmental crime in the North. Where evidence arises to pursue those who engage in illegal waste dumping or other environmental crime, I assure the House that the Department is determined to act and see that over the line.

12.15 pm

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for the work that has been carried out in Ballymartin, south Down. Will he outline the

time frame for the completion of the removal of the waste from the Ballymartin site?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. The intention is that that site will be cleared of the illegal rubbish by the end of October. I am involved in ongoing conversations between the Department and club representatives to try to ensure that the topsoil on the adjoining pitch, which has been removed so that other soil can be moved to fill in the holes that will be left when the illegal waste is removed, is replaced by the end of October so that the pitch can be reseeded and be available for football next season.

I compliment the members of Ballymartin GAC, for whom there has been great inconvenience and disturbance to their sporting activities, and the local community, which has suffered greater inconvenience and disturbance from the illegal dump. There has been a very close working relationship between the NIEA, club members and the club generally to ensure that the matter is handled. Inevitably, given the level of disturbance and inconvenience, there are still some matters that give rise to comment or to my involvement, but I am determined to ensure that the football pitch is available for reseeded by the end of the month and that the inconvenience, the loss of opportunity and the financial cost to the club is mitigated under the agreement as far as is reasonably possible.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his statement. He indicated that the clearances at Slattinagh and Trillick had been completed. Will he publish the total cost of cleaning those sites? I ask because 20% of the cost is met by the Northern Ireland Executive and cannot be spent on education, health or, indeed, other environmental matters.

Mr Attwood: I will publish and forward an interim report to the Environment Committee on all the costs to date, detailing the money that has come from the public purse in the North and the public purse in the South. I will ensure that that is published.

The Member's question is very well timed. The scale of the damage and the scale of the cost to the public purse resulted in a loss of opportunities for other priorities for public expenditure this year. The same applied last year, and it will apply next year and every year until the 17 sites are cleared. In the fullness of time, the sites may cost a little bit less because costs have come down. Alternatively, they might

cost a little bit more. Until you dig into the ground, you are never quite sure what you will find and you are never quite sure about the risk.

I will publish and circulate the cost of all this so that the people on this island, North and South, realise what criminal gangs and criminal individuals have done to damage the environment and to damage the public purse.

Mr Dallat: This statement clearly illustrates the absolute need for close co-operation between North and South on environmental policy. From the short time that he has been in post, does the Minister think that we are achieving the maximum potential in cross-border co-operation on environmental policy?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. It is self-evident that issues of the environment lend themselves fully to co-operation on an all-Ireland and all-island basis.

In June, I was at a conference of the British-Irish Council in London, where John Swinney, a senior member of the Scottish Government, remarked that renewables, green energy and green technology are the single biggest economic opportunity for Scotland. I have sympathy with that remark where Ireland is concerned, because I believe that they are arguably the single biggest economic opportunity for the island of Ireland. That is why, going forward, it is so important that environmental issues are dealt with on a North/South basis. Not only does the environment not recognise borders but environmental issues create huge economic opportunities for the people of this island in a wide range of areas.

Although various Ministers and the Executive have done great work on all-Ireland energy and environmental initiatives and although this and previous reports display and demonstrate the scale of that work, I have to say that I find it increasingly frustrating that the St Andrews review of North/South co-operation, which was commenced in 2007, is still not published in the year 2011 and that phase 2 of the review to identify new opportunities going forward has not even started. Given the integration of our economies and the fact that 5% of National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) assets are in the North and given that 40% of our exports go to the Republic of Ireland and we have common banking, it seems to me that, now that we are on the far side of the Assembly election and may have a period of settlement over the

next three or four years, we need to take that work forward urgently. We need to do that not for party reasons but for the common good of the people of the island of Ireland. The sooner we accelerate and grasp that, the better for the Irish Government, our own Government and the people of the island.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his statement. Given that an all-island recycled plastic waste arisings study, which looks at the generation and fate of recycling plastic waste across the island of Ireland, is expected to be published, will the Minister tell us what work is ongoing and whether he hopes that there will be a vast improvement in the cross-border recycling of plastic when that study is eventually published?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his questions. As I indicated, the report was actually published last Thursday, and I presume that it is on the NIEA's and the Environmental Protection Agency's websites. However, I will lodge a copy in the Library, because it is a compelling document. It reveals that 70% of plastics on the island of Ireland go into landfill. Only 30% is recycled, and, of that 30%, only 30% is recycled on the island of Ireland. The remainder, which is the greater part, is exported for recycling. Those are startling figures: 30% of the 30% that is recycled is recycled on the island of Ireland. The purpose, intention and ambition behind the arisings study was to interrogate the information and evidence in an effort to identify how we could create a greater internal market on the island of Ireland for the disposal of plastics, to reduce the amount that is exported and to maximise the volume of plastics that are currently not recycled but could be.

It is a difficult business. The next time you are drinking from a bottle of water, if you look at it, you will see that there are three different plastics in it: the plastic strip that names the bottle, the bottle itself and the cap. They create various technical, scientific and other difficulties. The purpose of this report is to identify how we are taking work on that forward, and Phil Hogan and I agreed on 1 July so to do. We will try, first, to build up information and communication about what the opportunities may be; secondly, we will identify new opportunities for the gathering and disposal of plastics on the island of Ireland; and, thirdly, we will look at how we will deal more effectively with bulky items such as fridges, furniture and mattresses. It is a startling fact

that there is only one machine on the island of Ireland, down in Wicklow, that will cut up a mattress to recycle all its contents, save the fire-retardant cover. Very few councils in the North are taking forward that opportunity for recycling.

The opportunities are enormous. Ten years ago, only 8% of domestic waste was recycled; in the North, the figure is now 34%. I believe that it can be more than 60% by 2020. Not only is that good for the environment but it is a key economic driver. As Phil Hogan and I said at the all-Ireland environment conference at Croke Park last Friday, our Governments need to recognise the scale of the opportunity, grasp it and take it forward in a much more accelerated way.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement. He rightly identified the key issue of repatriation of waste from illegal sites, and we are aware just how large those sites are. He referred to the early sites and, in response to an earlier question, to specific time frames for the first four sites. He also indicated that the other 13 sites would effectively be looked after by the group setting up in Newry from January, if I picked him up correctly. I appreciate that it is a very big problem. Will the Minister give an indication of any projected time frame for the completion of the repatriation from those 13 remaining sites?

Mr Attwood: I apologise for overlooking that question earlier. The answer is five years, subject to what people find when they go on site to remove the illegal waste and given the scale of what we think is on the remaining 13 sites. The time frame is also subject to legal, technical and other issues, including NIEA operators and contractors receiving full co-operation and not being subject to any adverse reaction when they go on site. I want to put down that marker. I do not want our staff to require PSNI protection when they go onto one or other site to do important work on behalf of people in the North of Ireland. I want to put down that marker very clearly. We have had the intolerable situation of the illegal dumping of waste from the South, and it would be intolerable if people who are trying to rectify and correct that problem on behalf of the people of Ireland end up requiring the protection of the PSNI. Subject to all those caveats — I need to put down some caveats — the intended time frame is five years.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement.

The Minister is obviously aware that new protocols are in place outlining the roles and responsibilities of the NIEA and local authorities. Does he foresee a role for local authorities in the removal or disposal of waste from any of the other 13 sites?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. The Member is right that new arrangements for councillors' powers and responsibilities on illegal dumping are being implemented. However, in respect of those matters, the answer is no. There is a framework agreement between the Irish Government, the authorities in Dublin, the Northern Ireland Executive, the Department of the Environment (DOE) and the NIEA that scopes out how the past sites, the current Ballymartin site and future sites will be managed, the costings involved, the discharge of the necessary moneys and the awarding of contracts. Obviously, everything has to be done in a proper and open manner, unlike some other things that are going on this week.

All of that is governed by current arrangements, and, subject to further advice from officials, I do not expect that a requirement for involvement will fall to councils. The matter will be dealt with at government level.

12.30 pm

Lord Morrow: Some of my questions have been answered, particularly in relation to the timescale for the clearing of the 13 sites. It will greatly dismay the community at large to hear that it is going to take five years to clear up that mess. Surely somebody has failed in their duties, Minister? How can it be that we have 15 identified sites? I do not know whether that means that there are some that are not identified. In the Minister's opinion, who should stand tall and say that they have failed? Will the Minister assure the House that this will never be repeated? Furthermore, the fact that 15 sites could be contaminated with waste from another jurisdiction without anyone being held responsible shows that cross-border co-operation is not working.

Mr Attwood: I thank Lord Morrow for his question. Given that the matter has been under government management for a number of years, I am tempted not to say that none of the previous DOE Ministers failed in their duties. In one way, I have sympathy for the Member, which is why I think that Anna Lo was right, as Chair

of the Committee, to go to Ballymartin. It would be right for people to go to Ballymartin or to any of the other sites to see the appalling state of ground conditions and their potentially adverse impact on the lives of local individuals and communities.

There has been, if you like, a failure in that the situation arose; it was not brought to the attention of the authorities at the relevant time, and, despite illegal dumping happening over years, no one got a grip of what was happening to mitigate the risk and reduce future occurrences. I am sympathetic in that respect, because there has been a failure, and the existence of 17 illegal dumps of that nature and scale suggests that something was not working in the way in which it was intended.

At the moment, I cannot give a guarantee that it will not happen again. In the past two years, only one report of illegal dumping in the North of material from the South has been made to the NIEA. That report was of the dumping of a trailer full of waste. As I outlined to one of Lord Morrow's colleagues during last week's Question Time, officials and others have told me that one reason for that is that variations in the cost of landfill mean that it is not as worthwhile for people to take waste from the South and dump it in the North. There could, however, be a situation in future when the state of the economies and variations in the cost of waste might make it worthwhile for individuals who are criminally minded to restart that sort of work.

Given the scale of what we experienced; the vigilance of Governments and other authorities against the threat; the need to bear down on criminal activity on the island of Ireland; the fact that we now have an environmental crime unit that does difficult work well; and the even tighter working relationships than heretofore between the police, the gardaí, the Department and the EPA in the Republic, including potential live operations, one would like to think that the community, the authorities and the political leadership will be more vigilant than in the past to reduce the risk in the future.

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Minister for his statement. Most of my questions have been answered. I particularly thank him for the update on the situation in the Ballymartin and Newry and Mourne areas. Will any of the cost of removing the illicit waste be imposed on local

councils? If that is not the case, who will pick up the bill?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for her question. As I indicated, 100% of the disposal costs and 80% of the removal costs are being covered by the authorities in the Republic, with 20% of the removal costs falling to the Northern Ireland Government. That is all being covered by the Northern Ireland Government. It will not pass to the councils, although, in my view, our councils need to step up to the mark in respect of the failure, or otherwise, of Northern Ireland to live up to environmental standards.

That is why, in the context of local government reorganisation, if, for example, there are infraction proceedings against the Government of Britain and Northern Ireland for their failure to live up to recycling, emissions or other targets, there will be a power to transfer the costs of that infraction from central government to local councils. In the future, if we do not live up to environmental standards, whatever they might be, local councils will have to pay the cost of any infraction.

Ms P Bradley: Minister, I thank you for your statement. Will you give us some indication of the timescale for the planned tender for the feasibility study on waste management that you mentioned in your statement?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for her question. There is an ongoing review of the Northern Ireland waste management strategy. There will be further details in respect of that in the near future. My counterpart in Dublin, Phil Hogan, confirmed on Friday that he is undertaking the exact same strategy and that there is a review of the Republic's waste management strategy going forward.

In the context of this report of the North/South environment sector, it seems to me that, if the Republic's Government and the Northern Ireland Government are on parallel paths in reviewing waste management strategy, we should, consistent with the mandate given to both of us in the North/South Ministerial Council and the sectors therein, be looking to see whether we can align policies in order to identify and maximise opportunity — for example, for municipal waste disposal — and join up, not just how we make assessments, not just statistical evidence and not just having common standards to measure all of that, which is ongoing work. I hope that that work will get

over the line by 2012 with the publication of essentially agreed standards to measure waste on the island of Ireland in order to help us to go forward in a more joined-up way.

I hope — Phil Hogan and I are certainly inclined towards this outcome — that there will be an understanding that, as we join up the intelligence and evidence base around waste management and as we create common standards to measure waste and waste management, that should then bounce us in a positive way into having a much more joined-up waste management strategy. Mr Hogan and I are determined, given that we are on the same parallel path, to create some level of convergence in the future by integrating and aligning waste management strategy, policies and priorities.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his previous answers. What anticipated ideas or strategy development does the Minister have for the North/South market development steering group?

Mr Attwood: As I said in a previous answer, I encourage Members to read the arisings study report, which captures the opportunities for the steering group and the potential for recycling initiatives and developments on the island of Ireland. To answer the question, some things can be done on a voluntary basis, others more strategically. For example, work is being done to move forward sectoral voluntary agreements on food waste disposal by the hospitality industry. I do not know whether anyone listened to 'Good Morning Ireland' this morning; it reported that the estimated loss of revenue in the hospitality sector in the Republic of Ireland due to the disposal of food waste into landfill, rather than being avoided in the first place, amounts to €120 million a year. That, apparently, is the cost of not managing food waste in the hospitality and hotels sector in the South in a way that avoids landfill, or of not being able to avoid the disposal of food waste in that way in the first place.

We are looking at opportunities, through the Republic of Ireland's green hospitality scheme and the Northern Ireland hospitality and food industry, to prevent food waste and identify better mechanisms for the disposal of food waste in order to reduce the amount of it and improve the efficiency of the process. I am minded to escalate that further. That is why, as I

said in my answer to a previous question, there are huge business and green opportunities on the island of Ireland in recycles — plastics and other materials that can be recycled — both to develop the internal market and, as I said earlier, to reduce the amount of exports going to sustain jobs in other parts of the world where the recycling industry is more advanced. I commend the arisings study report to Members who have an interest in those matters.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he outline the current state of North/South co-operation on research and development, particularly in waste management technology? Does he agree that there have been great advances in that technology, particularly those which have been developed by Northern Ireland heavy engineering industries? What benefits might those advances accrue to the waste management strategy, given that local authorities' waste management groups are considering the way forward?

Mr Attwood: As I said earlier, it is arguably the case that renewables, green technology and green innovation are Ireland's single biggest economic opportunity. The reason is self-evident; the quality of our wind and wave, given that we are Atlantic-facing, is the best for those purposes in Europe. The consequences of that for making the island of Ireland self-sufficient in energy, with the potential to export significant volumes of energy into the national grid elsewhere, will create enormous economic opportunities.

The central EU fund for research and development and innovation, known as FP7, is, as I said earlier, a £50 billion fund. It is, however, deeply frustrating that the island of Ireland and the Northern Ireland Executive have not had much more success in drawing down moneys from that fund. The Irish Government have a notional drawdown figure of €600 million over the six-year lifetime of FP7. If I remember correctly, 18 months ago the total drawdown by the Northern Ireland Executive under FP7 was, according to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, £25 million.

Given that we have a €50 billion fund over six years and given that our sister Government in Dublin have a notional drawdown of €600 million, it seems to me that, in the latter period of FP7 funding, which runs until 2013, we should still be identifying opportunities and

developing proposals for projects involving companies, universities and other jurisdictions that might be funded from FP7.

12.45 pm

There are two points to be made about that. First, there will be a successor to the FP7 fund, known as FP8. Two weeks ago, at a conference in Dundalk, an EU official said that FP8 is likely to comprise an €80 billion fund for R&D and innovation across the EU between 2014 and 2020. If our Executive and our economic agencies are to step up to the plate and address the economic threats and challenges that we face, we must dedicate ourselves to preparing for FP8 going live in 2014, not least because the relevant EU commissioner, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, is a former Member of Dáil Éireann. Although she will, of course, perform her duties in a balanced and fair manner, I am sure that she will be inclined to assist appropriately the island of Ireland.

The second intervention is that, in the latter days and years of FP7, officials in the EPA and the Irish Government in the South and in DOE and the NIEA in the North are attempting to identify projects to bid jointly for moneys for research, technology and innovation. I will not break the confidence of what those projects might be, but we are trying to fast-forward projects, working especially with the universities, in an effort, at this later stage, to draw down FP7 moneys.

Mrs D Kelly: The Minister outlined cross-border waste movements, particularly those involving illegal dumping. However, I am sure that he will be aware that, in recent days, concerns have been raised about the cross-border dumping of the waste by-product of illegal fuel laundering. Was cross-border, cross-agency co-operation between the police on both sides of the border a subject of discussion?

Mr Attwood: The Member is right to identify that issue. Even though there appears to have been little illegal dumping of waste from the Republic in the North in the past two years, the consequences of illegal fuel laundering continue to be a serious threat to moneys going to the Exchequer and to fuel quality. Moreover, assets are going into the hands of illegal organisations, criminal gangs and individual criminals, never mind the consequences of the by-products of illegal fuel laundering potentially getting into the water chain and having other adverse

environmental impacts. Therefore, the Member is correct to identify the issue.

The Member will also be aware of the scale of cross-border co-operation between the relevant agencies, and, crucially, between an Garda Síochána and the PSNI. It appears that not a week goes by when there is not further success by the respective authorities, including the police services on the island, in their efforts to bear down on those involved in fuel smuggling. As I indicated earlier, although the environmental crime section in DOE is small, I will try, if I am able, to enhance its resource capability so that we send a message to all those who may be tempted to involve themselves in criminal activity — be it illegal waste, illegal fuel laundering or other smuggling activities — that the authorities will bear down on all that.

It is not an easy process, as we have learned from illegal waste dumping, to turn illegality into evidence, evidence into prosecution and prosecution into conviction. It is not a straightforward undertaking, but I assure the Member that, when it comes to the environmental crime unit, the NIEA or DOE, I am very vigilant and will ensure that they apply all their resources and capacity to get those prosecutions over the line.

Private Members' Business

Fuel Poverty

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr D McIlveen: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the serious problem of fuel poverty, especially amongst older people; acknowledges the adverse impact that rising fuel bills are likely to have on the ability of older people to keep warm and healthy; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to make representations to Her Majesty's Government to continue to support Age Sector Platform's call to maintain this year's winter fuel payment at its current level of £250 for pensioner households where someone is aged between 60 and 79, and £400 where someone is aged 80 and over.

I welcome the opportunity to move the motion. Last Tuesday, the House voted on a motion concerning the part-time RUC Reserve gratuity payment. In the course of that debate, I and many others made reference to the fact that the payment was to reward and recognise those who have spent their lives serving us. The concept behind today's motion is exactly the same. We ought to view the winter fuel payment as sending out a message about how we treat our older people. We must not forget that they represent a generation of people who built up our country in exceptionally difficult and challenging circumstances. Indeed, it is a generation of people who went out to work every day even when it was dangerous and often life-threatening to do so. Therefore, I urge Members to keep those concepts firmly in their minds throughout the debate.

By way of context, Northern Ireland has what has been described as a unique fuel poverty landscape. There are three main factors behind fuel poverty: low incomes, high fuel prices and significant energy inefficiencies in our homes. Those three factors together mean that families

in Northern Ireland now have to make some very difficult choices about their budgets. According to the DSD (Department for Social Development), we spend twice as much of our disposable income on energy as people living in London, for example. However, our average earnings in 2010 were £365 a week, compared with £404 a week in the rest of the United Kingdom.

A further difficulty in relation to fuel poverty in Northern Ireland is the fact that 70% of Northern Irish households depend on oil heating. As we are all aware, the oil market is extremely volatile at the moment, and oil is much more expensive than gas. The Consumer Council has estimated that using oil will cost a household £1,000 a year more than if it were using gas. It will come as no surprise to the House that Northern Ireland has a colder climate than the rest of the United Kingdom. However, what may surprise the House is that, to meet World Health Organization standards, we would need to heat our homes for more than 310 days of the year.

In my capacity as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I know that there has been significant discussion surrounding the possibility of fuel price regulation, social tariffs, energy brokering and efficiency savings. Although I welcome the ground that is being made in those areas and the extensive work that is being done by the Department for Social Development through the warm homes scheme, we need to do more right now to protect the most vulnerable against the effects of fuel poverty. Ultimately, the impact of those Northern Ireland-specific issues is felt most by our older generation.

I have used many facts and figures in this speech, and I thank the Assembly for its patience in allowing me to go through them. I truly believe that, on the figures alone, there is a solid case for maintaining the winter fuel payment at last year's level. However, there is one figure that the Assembly should be especially concerned about: in 2009 and 2010, there were 950 deaths during winter, over and above the usual annual average. Those are what the statisticians call excess winter deaths. Eighty per cent of them were 65 years of age and over.

How can the coalition Government in Westminster justify cutting the payment when there is already an appalling number of unnecessary deaths in the winter months? Recent research from the

University of Ulster suggests that, besides the uncaring and penny-pinching nature of the cut, it does not make sense economically. For every death from the cold, there are eight hospital admissions and over 100 visits to GPs and health centres. For the benefit of those who, like me, are a little mathematically challenged, that means that, for the 950 deaths during the winter of 2009-2010, there will have been 7,600 extra hospital admissions and 95,000 extra visits to GPs and health centres. In addition, for every pound that we invest in tackling fuel poverty, 42p is saved in health costs.

Mr Storey: I declare an interest as a member of Ballymoney Borough Council. Five years ago this September, that council introduced an affordable fuel stamps scheme. There have been such schemes previously in Northern Ireland, but that was the first to be implemented by a local authority. Will the Member agree that that is one example of a practical measure that could be introduced across the board? Will he join me in calling on the Minister to look at that scheme as a way of giving practical help to the people whom he eloquently described as being caught in that situation?

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am aware of that scheme, which is to be welcomed. It is good to see that north Antrim is leading the way, as usual. I encourage the Minister to take away that suggestion and look at it in more detail.

I will bring the discussion back to a more personal level. Every day, people come into my constituency office and sign the 'Fight the Winter Fuel Cut' petition. Every day, they come in with concerns about how they will afford to heat their homes this winter and, every day, people come in to see whether they meet the criteria for the warm homes scheme or the boiler replacement scheme. In some cases, those people are genuinely having to make the decision of whether to keep warm or to buy food. Without exaggeration, the Assembly needs to consider the situation on the basis of whether we are content to allow our most vulnerable people to be put in the position of whether to heat or eat.

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

Recently, I met representatives from Age Sector Platform at my constituency office. Both they and I feel that the decision not to retain last year's level of payment is an absolute outrage.

When the payment was first introduced, it accounted for a third of the winter fuel bill that pensioners were paying. It now accounts for much less. Indeed, I am sure that, in future, Age Sector Platform will be campaigning for the fuel payment to be linked to energy prices. The team at Age Sector Platform has been inundated with calls and concerns from the community, and it reports that pensioners are coming to it in their hundreds with genuine concerns. To date, around 7,400 people have signed the petition, and I am sure that all Members will recognise from their constituency offices the story of people coming in with similar concerns.

The unavoidable truth is that we now have an ageing population, and we must be prepared to support our older generation accordingly. At the Northern Ireland Pensioners Parliament in June, the primary concern of pensioners was about keeping warm in winter. I am not comfortable with the revelation that older people are now more concerned with the basic right of keeping warm than they are with even the fear of crime. Ultimately, the winter fuel payment may be a short-term solution for older people, and, as such, I more than welcome the development of a comprehensive fuel poverty strategy in Northern Ireland. However, our older constituents have to get through this winter, and we must do what we can now to help them through it.

We have no issue with the amendment, but my concern is that this is an urgent issue that needs sorted out this winter. Although we have no issue in principle with the green new deal, even the most optimistic people in the Assembly will agree that it will not happen by this winter. The issue needs to be addressed right away, and we urge the Assembly to consider that.

1.00 pm

Mr Allister: I suspect that everyone in this House empathises with the Member's disappointment at the reduction in the winter fuel allowance, which, of course, had been foreshadowed for some time since it was introduced in 2008. The focus of the motion is to invite the Westminster Government to reinstate it, and all to the good if they do. However, given the budgetary process at present, some might doubt whether that will happen. In those circumstances, is he calling on this Executive to make up the difference? Why was that not factored into the Budget that went through this House before he and I were

Members? At that stage, it was known that the reduction was coming.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for his intervention. This motion is to call on our Minister to lobby Her Majesty's Government on the issue. The reduction has come about as a result of penny-pinching by the coalition Government, not through the Budget from this House. I am sure that the Minister will want time to speak on that, but I do not see it as an issue that the Executive can sort out. It is a matter for the Treasury and Her Majesty's Government to sort out.

I urge the Assembly to appreciate that, right now, in consideration of your constituents and with the possibility of another cold, hard winter ahead, we must support last year's level of winter fuel payment. I ask the Minister to lobby Her Majesty's Government to that end.

In closing, I reiterate my sentiments from the beginning of my speech. Northern Ireland has often been famous for all the wrong reasons —

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

Mr D McIlveen: However, we have always been known for treating our older generation with dignity and respect, and, in my opinion, the Assembly should pass this motion. Therefore, I commend it to the House.

Mr Agnew: I beg to move the following amendment: At end insert

“; and further calls on the Minister to increase funding for the green new deal to provide the energy efficiency measures required to tackle fuel poverty in the long term.”

I welcome today's timely debate on fuel poverty, and I thank the Member for proposing it. I also thank him for his comments on my amendment. We all noticed the recent dip in temperatures at the end of what, ultimately, was a cold summer even by our standards, and all predictions suggest that we face another harsh winter. As the proposer of the motion said, 44% of people in Northern Ireland are described as fuel poor, using the original definition that 10% or more of their income is spent on fuel. That amounts to over 300,000 people, and, given that those stats were produced before the recent rise in electricity prices, I suspect that that number may well have increased.

The proposer of the motion also mentioned the number of deaths caused each winter. Again, that is on the rise, and many of those deaths — estimated to be up to 1,000 last winter — can be directly attributable to the effects of fuel poverty. Older people suffer particularly badly during the cold weather due to their having fixed and, in many cases, relatively low incomes, and 61.5% of our over-60s live in fuel poverty. That figure increases with age, and a staggering 83.2% of lone older people are estimated to be in fuel poverty. We should be concerned about those figures and should look to address that issue.

The proposer of the motion paid much attention to the older generation when debating the issue, as is generally the case when the issue is discussed, but we must look also to the impacts on the other end of the spectrum. Infants who live in fuel poverty have a 30% greater risk of admission to hospital or primary care. Children face their own “heat or eat” battle in the sense that much of the energy from food that should go towards children's development growth is instead used to produce heat. Again, that has future health impacts and may have impacts on cognitive development and future education achievement. There is a direct link between fuel poverty and mental ill health in adolescence. All those factors combined serve to reiterate Mr McIlveen's call on the UK Government by highlighting the issue's severity and the need to retain the winter fuel payment.

However, there are things that we can also do in Northern Ireland. I outlined the costs to society. It is estimated that fuel poverty costs the NHS £859 million a year, UK-wide. If we take our population into account — the higher proportion of people in Northern Ireland who suffer from fuel poverty and our particularly high energy costs — it is likely to cost our Health Department more than £50 million a year. Yet, research shows that £1 spent on alleviating fuel poverty can save 42p in health service provision. Therefore, I welcome the Minister for Social Development's attendance at today's meeting and his interest in that area, but, given those statistics, the issue is not one solely for his Department, or, for that matter, Her Majesty's Government; it must be worked on on a cross-departmental basis.

As the proposer of the motion said, income, energy costs and energy efficiency are factors that influence the rates of fuel poverty. That is why we need to see a cross-departmental

working group that includes the Social Development Minister, perhaps as lead, but also the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister, the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Health Minister, so that we can see how each can play their part in alleviating fuel poverty.

The winter fuel payment is a welcome addition in supplementing old people's income, which is at the crux of the motion. However, with the rate of energy inflation, that payment becomes less valuable every year. In fact, were older people to receive the £250 this year, it would be worth the equivalent of £140 compared with 2005 energy prices. That shows that we need other measures to tackle the problem. We can do little to stop energy prices, certainly those in oil and gas, but I welcome the measure in the departmental strategy, Warmer Healthier Homes, to look at brokering and the use of purchasing power to reduce fuel prices for those in social housing and Housing Executive homes.

That will not tackle the fuel poverty that is also suffered by many people in private homes. Members may be interested to learn that a number of energy co-operatives have sprung up in England. I hope that we can look at that and see how the Assembly can support those who wish to form energy co-ops and perhaps encourage communities to do so. However, we in Northern Ireland are very dependent on fossil fuels. We need to address that, and I know that the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister is looking at this, but we must look at what we can do in other areas. I am conscious that, in 2007, the then Finance Minister, Peter Robinson, dropped the mandatory renewables element from building regulations. That needs to be addressed.

Energy efficiency is a key issue in the debate and in my amendment, which I hope will be seen as friendly because I support the motion as it stands. However, we should go further. Investing in the green new deal and energy efficiency measures is the most cost-effective way in which we can tackle fuel poverty. A £72 million public investment will unlock a total investment of £253 million, with contributions from the private sector, including energy companies. Fifty thousand homes a year could receive energy efficiency measures, compared with the 9,000 homes a year targeted by the current warm homes scheme. The costs for each home would also be reduced because of the volume and the private sector involvement. It costs over

£2,000 a home under the warm homes scheme, but under the green new deal scheme the cost would come down to around £1,400. There would be added benefits, with around 10,000 to 15,000 jobs created or sustained and over 300,000 tons of carbon saved each year. We would be hitting a number of cross-departmental targets through the development of the green new deal scheme.

We must also ensure that all our newbuilds have minimum energy efficiency standards. I am conscious that level 3 in the code for sustainable homes must be met in all new social housing developments. I believe that with advances in energy efficiency technology we could and should go beyond that. However, we must see what can be done with private housing, because there is no such requirement in the private sector to build homes to a minimum energy standard. It is much cheaper to do that at the front end when we are building our homes than to retrofit them once they have been built. We need to get it right from the start to prevent people from being fuel poor in the future.

Although we do not yet have a Programme for Government, it is clear that the economy will once again be the overall priority. However, I argue that fuel poverty, given its detrimental impact on human lives, should feature highly in the Executive's priorities. Social and economic issues are not separate. Investment in the green new deal will have economic benefits as well as being a key strand in the battle to reduce and eradicate fuel poverty.

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

Mr Agnew: I hope that Members will see my amendment as a friendly amendment. I support the motion, but I hope that people will accept my amendment as taking the issue further.

Mr A Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As the Committee has not had the opportunity to discuss the motion or the amendment, it has not adopted a formal position. However, it is appropriate to put on the record the developing context on behalf of the Committee over the past few months, certainly since the beginning of the new mandate. All Committee members are alive to the issue of fuel poverty and are anxious to take forward some work on the issue. Members, including the proposer of the

motion, have outlined a number of concerns which are felt by all Committee members.

On 23 June, representatives from the Fuel Poverty Coalition and the National Energy Action on fuel poverty made submissions to the Committee. Although those groups stressed that they wanted to work constructively with the Department and the Committee, they had several criticisms, which I want to outline. They felt that the Department's fuel strategy, which was launched in April this year, failed to provide targets or road maps on how the vision for the eradication of fuel poverty would be achieved. The delegation also questioned the effectiveness of the interdepartmental group on fuel poverty, which is chaired by the Minister for Social Development. They cited issues such as the lack of regular meetings and stressed the importance of an immediate review of the effectiveness of the fuel strategy. They also called for the resurrection of the fuel poverty task force and asked for additional resources to be restored to the warm homes scheme. Following those representations, the Committee wrote to the Department raising a number of those concerns. A lot of the issues raised were shared by many Committee members.

Other points raised by the Committee included further information from the Department on the boiler replacement scheme and any other plans or initiatives that the Department or the Minister might be involved in with colleagues to address fuel poverty here, not least the fact that our community has a high dependency on home heating oil.

1.15 pm

As Chairperson of the Committee, I met again the Consumer Council representatives who are involved in the Fuel Poverty Coalition. I spoke to them about identifying and adopting some pragmatic steps that the Committee could take. They came up with a number of positions, which they presented to the Committee. Indeed, coincidentally and fortuitously, the Committee will take a further briefing from departmental officials this Thursday on the issues of concern that were raised with them, and it will consider those in some detail.

As I said, Committee members are very concerned that they take this matter forward and that they do what they can and work with the Department, which has a responsibility to take the matter forward on an interdepartmental

basis. Members have been clearly articulating their concern that we are coming into a very difficult and challenging climate — no pun intended — with increased fuel prices and the so-called welfare reforms, which we believe will lead to much greater cuts and rising unemployment. Those events are coming together, and they are not making a very prosperous environment for people who are vulnerable to fuel poverty problems. Our Committee is, therefore, very much looking forward to hearing from the Minister and hearing from the officials this Thursday and to trying to take this matter forward on the basis of working with other Committees. I hope and expect that, following this week's briefing, I will be able to speak to all Committees with a view to trying to take some initiative to highlight the issue and, in fact, to taking some very pragmatic and important steps forward on a collective basis.

Finally, I want to speak as a party representative. In general, our party supports the intention of the motion and the amendment, but I do not think the amendment adds anything precise. However, the motion does not go far enough —

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

Mr A Maskey: We need to have a more concerted effort to address our concerns to the British Government, which placed people in this position in the first place.

Mr Copeland: I, too, thank the Members responsible for bringing the motion to the House this afternoon. In assessing these matters, you can look at numbers and statistics until you are blue in the face, or you can sit in front of a coal fire, a radiator or a central heating system that you cannot afford to run until you are blue in the face.

The motion begins with the words:

"That this Assembly recognises the serious problem of fuel poverty".

I ask myself, "Do we recognise it?" I also ask whether it is something that we can raise and take along a particular route. The way in which we recognise it appears to be confused, because in the rest of the United Kingdom, you appear to be in fuel poverty if you burn or spend more than 10% of your income. If applied to Northern Ireland, that statistic would not give

13% but somewhere in the region of 44%. If you take 44%, it comes out at 302,000. That is not 302,000 people, as Mr Agnew said, but 302,000 households. Some 302,000 households could be half a million people.

Time after time I stand here and listen to people talking about the waiting lists for housing. They say that there are 38,000 or 39,000 people on the waiting lists. However, it is not 38,000 or 39,000 people; it is 38,000 or 39,000 applications. It is not applications that send us here; it is not applications that mandate us; it is not applications who have need: it is people. We need to start seeing the tears that lie behind some of those statistics.

Many houses in Northern Ireland are of poor quality, and many are not properly insulated. We have a boiler scheme, which, I think, has had only 200 applications. I would be grateful if, at some stage in the future, the Minister could give me an update on the progression of the pilot boiler replacement scheme.

I am speaking in full support of the motion and the amendment, as brought forward by both parties concerned.

However, to truly get an answer, we are going to have to perform a balancing act that allows people to be warm for the next 24 or 48 hours and, at the same, finds money to invest or engineer out the difficulties that are feeding the system and the problem. Fuel poverty does not solely apply to people being cold in their own homes. As has been said, fuel poverty has ramifications in education, the health service and a range of other areas.

Is it honest of us to say that we, here, can do nothing? We can go to Westminster — the Minister would have the full support of any right-thinking person in this room in dealing with Westminster — but Westminster is liable to say no, despite the fact that the rises in fuel duty and gas and electricity prices have all accumulated to a rise in value added tax, which is taxing this distress and the people who suffer.

In Northern Ireland, it is very expensive to be poor. If you use a power card to put electricity into your home, you will pay more, even though you are paying for that electricity before you get it, as opposed to people like me and, I presume, many others, who pay for their electricity after they get it.

No matter what we say in this room, unless we are prepared to take money from one budget and put it into another to address this, we are dependent on the good nature of a fiscally strapped Government in the United Kingdom. I thank the Member for mentioning the coalition Government only twice. I somewhat suspect that, no matter what the mix of political representation in Westminster or had we been discussing this after the previous election, the results would, unfortunately, have been pretty much the same.

I support the motion and the amendment.

I trust that Members will allow me one slight pictorial episode. The house that I was born into had —

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

Mr Copeland: — a fireplace in every room. Those were coal fireplaces; you lit it and it burned.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Copeland: Thank you for saving me.

Mr Durkan: Given the ever-escalating number of people struggling with fuel poverty and the prospect of another harsh winter, we very much welcome and support the motion and its amendment and their desired intention of alleviating the hardship faced by so many older people in our society due to unaffordable fuel costs.

Aiding the most vulnerable in society has always been a priority for my party, and it remains so today and particularly over the coming cruel winter months. We must ensure that we do not have a repeat of last winter's sheer human cost of fuel poverty, which saw the deaths of almost 1,000 people due primarily to freezing temperatures.

Pensioners face the situation in which they have to choose whether to heat or eat. We must do all that we can in this regard. Not only must we adopt the motion and support the Social Development Minister in his endeavours to protect winter fuel payments, we, as a functioning institution, must take our own proactive steps to tackle fuel poverty.

The social protection fund was envisaged as a tool with which to protect our most vulnerable citizens from the most severe of cuts from

Westminster. However, it in itself has been sufficiently cut in our Budget as to render it virtually negligible.

The previous Social Development Minister's initiatives to tackle fuel poverty were to be applauded and welcomed, but, with the continually growing need for assistance with heating costs, we need to go further. It is not enough either to maintain payments, as fuel prices continue to soar. Ideally, payments would reflect costs.

As stated in Mr Agnew's amendment, more money needs to be allocated to the provision of energy efficiency measures, and projects such as the warm homes and boiler replacement schemes must be properly resourced and properly rolled out.

Yes, these are hard times for government, but they are impossible times for many citizens. We must protect the most vulnerable, and human need must prevail. Statistically, as a few Members have highlighted, fuel poverty is more acute here in the North than in Great Britain. I wonder whether it is a coincidence that nowhere has a more fragmented approach to tackling the issue of fuel poverty than here. That underlines the need for a single Department or agency to be responsible for energy, or, in the absence of that, at least increased and improved cross-departmental working.

Furthermore, it is not ideal or even satisfactory that winter fuel payments are made only to the elderly, not all of whom live in poverty. That has to be underlined. One can think of other vulnerable groups across our constituencies, such as families with young children and people with serious health problems. As a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I know that the extension of winter fuel payments will help to alleviate the huge burden on the health service, which is exacerbated by very cold temperatures. Indeed, I am sure that a cost-benefit analysis would demonstrate that the significant investment involved in developing a robust strategy to address fuel poverty would be repaid by the savings realised in primary and secondary healthcare.

As already stated, the most cost-effective and sustainable way to tackle fuel poverty is to introduce energy efficiency measures. Increased focus and funds must be placed on that. In the meantime, we must act, urge the Minister to act and support him when he does. We must urge

Westminster to act to ease the suffering of so many older citizens this winter.

My party supports the motion and the amendment.

Mrs Cochrane: Fuel poverty has reached crisis levels. As Mr Agnew said, more than 60% of older people and 83% of lone older people in Northern Ireland live in fuel poverty. Fuel poor households simply do not have enough money to heat and power their homes adequately. The consequences are debts, the forgoing of essential needs, excess winter deaths, ill health and mental stress due to the difficulty of paying bills and living in cold homes.

We all remember last winter and the unprecedented freezing temperatures that lasted for such a long period. Many people faced financial difficulties when it came to heating their homes and preventing pipes from freezing. Even those who can usually comfortably heat their homes found that they had to make choices. Those choices may have included whether to eat out in a nice restaurant, but, for so many others, the choice was whether to eat or heat.

A report today from the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux shows a desperate picture of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland, particularly in rural areas. It highlights the fact that one third of elderly clients have had to make a choice between heating and other essential items such as food. It also shows that 59% of disabled respondents have had to choose between food and heat. The number of households in fuel poverty is fast approaching 50%. The main reason for its rapid growth is the 12% rise in fuel prices since 2003, and fuel prices will continue to rise in the medium to long term because of the investment required to replace an ageing infrastructure and the impact of high oil prices. Unfortunately, benefit rates, pensions, tax credits and the minimum wage have not kept pace with fuel price inflation, and, realistically, they are never likely to.

Higher fuel prices drive up fuel poverty. However, improved energy efficiency can bring it down. Large amounts of energy and money are wasted trying to heat and power poorly insulated homes. By bringing the homes of the fuel poor up to the energy efficiency standards of new homes, we could reduce fuel bills by an average of 52%, thereby taking the vast majority out of fuel poverty. Tackling energy efficiency in homes should, therefore, be a key priority for the

long term, whether through loft and cavity wall insulation or whatever. Although I appreciate that DSD has invested money in making homes more energy efficient, it has not gone far enough.

For example, of the 500,000 homes that use oil, around 400,000 have old, inefficient boilers, yet the recent funding is aimed at replacing less than 1% of those.

1.30 pm

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Member for giving way. She touches on a very important point about energy efficiency in homes. However, to date, the amount of money that the Government have allocated to the green new deal is £12 million, which, incidentally, her party supported in the Budget. Surely that is inadequate to deal with the extent of the problem that she rightly identified.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his point. It is inadequate. Furthermore, it is not an issue for DSD alone. As Mr McIlveen said, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) must also recognise the serious health implications of fuel poverty, given the strong link between fuel poverty and cost to the NHS. For every £1 invested in alleviating fuel poverty, 42p is saved in health costs.

The Citizens Advice survey, to which I referred, reports that a significant number of people not only attributed their problems to poor insulation and heating but claimed that they would benefit from energy-efficiency advice. That is something on which we should focus. Something similar to the energy assistance package that is being delivered in Scotland could be considered.

There are four key steps to that package. First, it offers tariff advice. Although I appreciate that we do not have as much choice as people in the rest of the UK, we do have some options to seek better tariffs with alternative providers. Secondly, the package provides energy efficiency advice to help people to become more energy-wise. Thirdly, it brings together the various energy efficiency initiatives into one programme so that all the options for home improvements can be accessed through a one-stop shop. At present, there is a lot of confusion about which schemes are still running and what their eligibility criteria are. Finally, it aims to ensure income maximisation; that is, it offers assistance in obtaining all the relevant benefits and sources of income. That sort of joined-up

approach could focus our efforts to truly deal with fuel poverty.

At present, the winter fuel payments are of significant benefit to older people, and I urge the Minister to do all that he can to ensure that they will continue to be paid at last year's rate. Although not a long-term solution to the overall problem, income is one of the key factors that influences whether a household is in fuel poverty. Until such times as other factors — namely, fuel prices and energy efficiency — are adequately tackled, we cannot realistically expect our older people to manage without that income.

It is clear from the debate that fuel poverty is a huge challenge, and, as other Members highlighted, the green new deal, if we invest enough in it, can make significant inroads into tackling it in the long term. The key proposal for that in the green new deal would be the insulation scheme to refurbish tens of thousands of existing homes, including the 137,000 homes that currently fail to meet the decent homes standard. Therefore, I urge the Minister —

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

Mrs Cochrane: — to address the problem of fuel poverty in the long term and, in the short term, to do all that he can to ensure that the winter fuel payments are reinstated at last year's level.

Mr Easton: I support the motion. Last winter was one of the coldest and most prolonged for some time. It came at a time when families and friends met for Christmas in the comfort of their homes to enjoy their holidays. Temperatures dropped to record levels, leaving many people cold and having to keep their heating on constantly, at huge cost to their families. Many people, however, were unable to maintain heating their homes owing to the cost, and that left them open to frozen pipes and having to live in what can only be described as arctic conditions.

I know of many oil companies that sought to take advantage of the situation, and the price of a litre of fuel rose from 50p to 75p. Many people were left with no choice but to pay it, and many others could not afford to pay it.

The recently published 'Northern Ireland House Condition Survey 2009' shows that 44% of households in Northern Ireland have to pay more than 10% of their income for energy. The World Health Organization defines a satisfactory heating regime as being 21°C in the living room and 18°C in other areas, although households with specific needs may require different levels of heating.

The number of people living in fuel poverty in Northern Ireland far exceeds the number in other regions of the UK, which is most concerning. Those who are more likely to feel the effects of fuel poverty or more likely to suffer health problems as a result of the cold weather are the elderly population, which is rising fast. A Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) report in 2009 stated that people over 60 years of age accounted for 16.9% of the total population of Northern Ireland. That presents a major challenge to the Government in seeking to maintain the levels of funding provided for our elderly population, especially with the cuts made to our block grant by the Tory-led coalition in London. Therefore, I support the motion and the maintenance of the current level of winter fuel payment, which has gone some way to eradicating fuel poverty and to limiting the effects of cold weather.

Mr Agnew's amendment is well meaning and has some good ideas for more profitable times; however, in the current economic climate many of them are probably not affordable. I welcome DUP Minister Nelson McCausland's boiler replacement scheme. It is targeted at people over 60 years of age who live in private accommodation and who may not qualify under other Government efficiency schemes. It will benefit many in my constituency, which has one of the highest aged populations in Northern Ireland. I hope that it will go a long way to increase boiler efficiencies and result in savings, which are becoming more difficult due to the soaring price of electricity, gas and oil.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, support the motion and have no disagreement with the amendment, but I think that it is a different issue, as it is about taking on broader, longer-term efforts.

Over the four years that I have been in the Assembly, fuel poverty has been debated umpteen times. Therefore it is time that a determined effort was made to do something

effective because a lot of lip service is paid to the relief of fuel poverty but not a lot has actually been done. Fuel poverty has been an issue and received policy attention here in the North only since the publication of DSD's 2004 report 'Ending Fuel Poverty' and the more recent 2010 review 'Warmer Healthier Homes'. The situation has also continued to worsen because of escalating fuel prices. The main causes of fuel poverty have already been mentioned: household income; fuel and energy costs; and the energy efficiency of homes, particularly in rural areas. There are more than 300,000 people of retirement age today in the North, which is over 17% of the population. Forty-four per cent of households here suffer fuel poverty compared to Scotland with 33%, Wales with 20% and England with 16%. The problem is much more acute here.

There was an item in 'The Irish News' on Saturday, by a journalist who has obviously not been in the benefits system, about the Fuel Poverty Coalition talking to the Minister about his new fuel poverty measure. He said that the Fuel Poverty Coalition told the 'Belfast Telegraph' that it wants to see targeted support for all households in fuel poverty; but how can you target support when you insist on a definition that covers almost half the population? That shows an inherent ignorance of the problem. In Britain and in the North we have the meanest pension scheme in the developed world. There is almost £2 million of unclaimed pension credit every week, which is something that needs to be addressed. Perhaps more education is needed, particularly for some of our journalists.

Although efforts have been made to alleviate the problem, the situation has gotten much worse since the introduction of the fuel poverty strategy in 2004. The Minister introduced the pilot boiler replacement scheme, which was allegedly targeted at the most vulnerable, with the aim of improving energy efficiency. It has proved to be confusing and difficult to claim, and it appears to have missed those who are most vulnerable and in need of help. We are faced with the stark reality for older people here that in 2004-05 there were 293 excess winter deaths. That statistic was mentioned by several Members. By 2009-2010, that figure had increased to approximately 900. That is an appalling statistic, and we cannot repeat it enough to get the message home. The message

about excess winter deaths has certainly been repeated many times before in the Assembly.

There also is evidence that cold housing is linked to diminished resistance to respiratory infection, hypothermia, bronchospasms, ischaemic heart disease, myocardial infarction and strokes. As was mentioned, the overall annual cost to the National Health Service in 2009 was almost £900 million. Not enough has been done in the fight against fuel poverty; the strategy is not working and needs urgent review.

Increasing older people's incomes will help them to deal with the burden of energy bills. Several provisions could be introduced: the automatic payment of pension credit, for example, could help to address low incomes. I mentioned the fact that almost £2 million in pension credit is unclaimed weekly. Given the higher fuel poverty levels here, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) must take a more proactive approach and introduce a compulsory scheme by which energy suppliers must ease the burden for vulnerable people.

The warm homes scheme has certainly helped. However, there is concern that reductions have been made to that successful scheme, given that capital allocations are being cut. It is inconceivable that winter fuel payments are being cut by £50 for people aged between 60 and 80 and by £100 for those over 80. That is despite spiralling fuel prices and the fact that —

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

Mr Brady: — last December was the coldest in over 100 years. It seems that the Government have not addressed the seriousness of the situation, which is set to increase, given our increasing ageing population and energy costs. It is time to do something, and we need to do it now.

Mr Douglas: I apologise; I am a bit hoarse. I was at a cross-community event in Glasgow yesterday.

I fully support the motion, which, for me, is about supporting the Age Sector Platform and its endeavours to maintain winter fuel payments. It has been said many times before that the Assembly will be judged not on how much talk there is at debates or on how many questions we ask but on how we deliver actions that support the people of Northern Ireland, and

indeed, how we support the most vulnerable, particularly older people. We are talking about people who have been the backbone of society and who have worked all their lives and paid their taxes. Surely we should be supporting those older members of our society in the twilight of their lives.

Like many Members, I have been in the homes of older people who often have to choose between, as we have said before, food or fuel, or where they switch off their electricity and sit in the dark and cold purely to pay the bills that they are struggling with. We are talking about a generation of older people, many of whom were brought up in poverty and who had to learn the harsh realities of budgeting and dealing with the scarce amounts of money coming into their homes. We are not just talking about a few extra bob in people's pockets and wallets; we are talking about helping people to live their lives just like the rest of us in normal society.

If we rewind to last winter, which was the coldest that I can remember, we will recall that there were problems with freezing and burst pipes. Many people have outdated heating systems.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Member for giving way. I hear what the Member is saying, and I am sure that he is well intentioned, as indeed are many of the other Members who spoke. However, what will the Member do or what will he urge the Government to do other than what is contained in the motion about benefits? What does the Member suggest the Government do about the green new deal, which is one of the best mechanisms for introducing, on a comprehensive basis, energy efficiency in homes and which would, in fact, reduce the level of dependency on antiquated heating systems?

1.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute added to his time.

Mr Douglas: Thank you very much. That is a good question. I support many of those issues. Our difficulty with the green new deal is that it seems disparate and lacks co-ordination. I suppose that we will have the opportunity to debate those issues in the future. Therefore, for me, the jury is out.

As I said earlier, the reality is that many people, particularly those who own their homes, have outdated heating systems. Recently, I visited

such a home. I am not talking about homes in areas that are recognised as disadvantaged; I am talking about areas where people have worked all their lives in decent jobs and have bought their own homes. However, as people get older, particularly if their partner has died, they find it increasingly difficult to pay their bills. They may have paid off their mortgages. However, often, those people end up in poverty, never mind fuel poverty. I am talking about a fair section of our society.

This morning, I found out that between August 2009 and August 2011, oil prices increased by some 63%. Something like 70% of homes in Northern Ireland are heated by oil. I welcome the review into oil industry pricing that will be published, I believe, in October 2011. Hopefully, we will see an opportunity to encourage regulation of that industry.

As other Members have said, we need to take seriously the difficulties that will result from another harsh winter. One Member stated that last year, there were 1,000 deaths because of the harsh winter.

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

Mr Douglas: We can research, raise issues and discuss fuel poverty. However, at the end of the day, it is about doing something. Therefore, let us show our support for the most vulnerable people in the community. I fully support the motion.

Mr Swann: I, too, support the motion. I have engaged with Age Sector Platform's chief executive and board. They are keen to ensure that the motion and their campaign to fight cuts to winter fuel payments receive full cross-party support. I hope that that is achieved today.

The motion states that the Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to make representations to Her Majesty's Government to continue to support Age Sector Platform. As DSD is the lead Department with responsibility for tackling fuel poverty, I would have hoped that the Minister had already raised that issue with Her Majesty's Government. However, I thank the two Members for bringing the matter to the attention of the House and the Minister.

As has already been said, a society should be judged on how it treats its most vulnerable people. We have heard a great deal of statistics

in the debate, particularly with regard to excess winter deaths. I remind the House that when we talk about an excess winter death statistic, we are talking about an individual; a person with family and friends. That is why we in the House and society need to do more.

When we reflect on DSD targets to eradicate poverty in vulnerable households by 2010 and in all households by 2016, we should consider that had those targets been met, it would have negated the need for the topic to be raised in the House. In fact, the House has failed to meet any target that has been set for the eradication of poverty in any sphere of society. Indeed, further difficulties and problems are faced.

The previous Programme for Government has also failed. I think it was Lord Morrow who, when talking earlier, said that we have failed here. Surely, the statistics demonstrate that we have failed here, particularly given the number of debates that have taken place in this House on fuel poverty.

It was mentioned that 61.5% of old people are living in fuel poverty in Northern Ireland, which is an increase from 47% in 2006. It was also mentioned that 83.2% of lone older people are living in fuel poverty, which is a staggering 21% increase since 2006. So, we seriously need to take measures that can be adopted in this House and that our own ministerial teams can work on.

There has been mention of the green new deal and its lack of co-ordination. I can also see a lack of co-ordination in and a fragmented approach to the fight against fuel poverty. I reiterate the calls that have already been made for a cross-departmental working group involving DSD, DETI, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and the Health Department.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is an issue that we can credibly do something about and credibly fight for the sake of all our constituencies. However, we also need to commit to educate people in our society. They need to avail themselves of every penny that they are entitled to, and DSD must assist them in doing that. It is up to better education systems to do that.

Over 40% of pensioners are in fuel poverty, and 13% are in extreme fuel poverty, which means that over 25% of their annual household

income is spent on heating. More can be done to increase energy efficiency in our homes. The warm homes scheme has a target of 9,000 households. I do not think that that is an adequate response, because if it is a matter of ticking a box for one household to achieve one of those 9,000 targets, we have failed many in society who did not make it into that box.

Today, I received a copy of the Citizens Advice report, which was issued ahead of the debate. One third of elderly clients in the Citizens Advice survey have had to make the choice between heating and buying other essential items such as food. We use the phrase "heat or eat" too flippantly. It is just tripping off people's tongues, and we should take into consideration what it actually means. It is not about deciding whether to eat in a nice restaurant; it is about deciding whether to live.

More can be done by improving the efficiency of heating in our homes. Schemes for double glazing, loft insulation and cavity wall insulation —

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

Mr Swann: OK. I hope that this debate is credible and realistic and that people want to achieve honest outcomes from it rather than make headlines and get photo opportunities.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the debate, and I thank the Members who contributed to it. I note Members' concerns and comments, and I particularly welcome the opportunity to debate this aspect of fuel poverty. If my response fails to address any specific points, I will, of course, write to Members separately.

The motion recognises the serious problem of fuel poverty among older people and the adverse impact that rising fuel bills are likely to have on older people's ability to keep warm. I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion, which calls on me to make representations to Her Majesty's Government for the rates of this year's winter fuel payment to be paid at the same rate as that of the past three years, that is, £250 for pensioner households where someone is aged between 60 and 79 and £400 where someone is aged 80 or over.

Winter fuel payments are made to people who are over the age of 60, with a higher rate paid

to people over the age of 80. The payments are not income related, nor are they linked to individual circumstances. They do not take account of fuel poverty needs. They are paid to everyone who has reached the qualifying age. For the coming winter, the standard rates of winter fuel payments will be paid: £200 for households with a pensioner aged under 80 and £300 for households with anyone aged 80 or over.

Members will be aware that those aged under 80 will receive £50 less, and those aged over 80 £100 less, than in the previous three years. The increased rates for the past three years were temporary increases. No increase was announced in the Budget, and the temporary increase will not be continued for this winter.

As Members are aware, the issue of fuel poverty is one that cuts across Departments, and I have and will continue to engage with Executive colleagues on this matter. A number of Members raised the issue of the importance of a cross-departmental approach. I can assure Members that I have raised issues in relation to this and have engaged with Ministers in other Departments.

At a time of rising gas, oil and coal prices, the issue of fuel poverty is a real one for many people, and the focus should be on helping those most in need. In addition to winter fuel payments, support is available through cold weather payments for areas that suffer particularly cold weather. Those payments are made when the temperature is, or is forecast to be, zero Celsius or below for seven consecutive days. The temporary increase of this payment from £8.50 to £25 has been made permanent and is paid per cold weather period.

I would like to give Members some details of the wider package, in addition to social security provision, that my Department has to tackle fuel poverty. In April 2011, the Department launched its new fuel poverty strategy entitled 'Warmer Healthier Homes'. The strategy set our vision for the future as:

"a society in which people live in a warm, comfortable home and need not worry about the effect of the cold on their health".

The strategy places significant emphasis on the partnership approach required to tackle fuel poverty and the cross-departmental nature of the whole area of poverty.

At a time of economic recession, rising unemployment and cuts in welfare expenditure, more and more people are finding it difficult to meet their energy costs. The strategy takes forward energy brokering, calls for action on the price of oil imports, introduces a pilot boiler replacement scheme and develops a range of other initiatives. I encourage everyone in the Assembly to read the strategy carefully and to ensure that they are well informed about it and that they encourage others to be better informed about it so that people are aware of the various opportunities to tackle fuel poverty and address the problem.

The Department continues to fund the warm homes scheme, which offers a range of insulation and heating measures to vulnerable householders. Under the scheme, in excess of 80,000 households have been helped with insulation and/or heating measures since it started in 2001. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive administers an annual heating replacement scheme that improves energy efficiency within the social housing sector.

Recently, the University of Ulster launched a report entitled 'Defining Fuel Poverty in Northern Ireland: A preliminary review', and its findings and recommendations will generate much debate. The report reaffirms that, using the UK definition of fuel poverty, which is twice the median income spend on energy — that is, 10% — Northern Ireland continues to show the highest levels of fuel poverty in the United Kingdom. The report also recommends that, to assist targeting of resources and initiatives, a regional target should be developed based on twice the median regional spend — that is, a spend of 18%. Using that approach would mean that 13% of households in Northern Ireland, which equates to 75,000 households, will experience fuel poverty at that level. This provides the Department with a very useful tool that will help to focus initiatives on those most in need.

I attended the launch of the report, and it was useful to have there not only those who carried out this report but also the lady who was the originator of the whole concept of fuel poverty and the 10% figure to get a better understanding of the background to the statistics. One thing that I picked up on was that the whole process of localisation or regionalisation with regard to figures is not unique to Northern Ireland. It is happening

across the United Kingdom with Scotland and Wales and in other regions of Europe.

2.00 pm

The Social Security Agency has promoted a benefit uptake programme since 2005. It has resulted in 337,000 older people being contacted and additional benefits totalling £27.1 million being paid to those aged 60 and over. I stress that point because a number of Members emphasised the need to make older folk, in particular, aware of the opportunities for benefit assistance.

My Executive colleague Minister Wilson announced funding of £12 million for the green new deal concept over the comprehensive spending review period 2011-14. My Department's permanent secretary is chairing a cross-departmental group to examine the potential of the green new deal for Northern Ireland. The group is working with the Green New Deal Group to help it to formalise a business plan that can inform any economic appraisal on the best approach to allocating the £12 million identified by the Executive. The Green New Deal Group was hoping to have the business plan with us by mid-September, but I understand that it is now expected to submit the business plan by the end of September. I have been working closely with my Executive colleague Minister Foster on the development of the green new deal. I have asked officials to consider all the current strands of work that support energy efficiency, carbon reduction and renewable technology. All those initiatives display my Department's commitment to helping older people to cope with their winter fuel bills.

Mr Allister: I do not want to take the Minister off course, but I want to make this point before he finishes dealing with the winter fuel allowance and the cutting thereof. The House is saying today that many people depend on that full allowance. If it transpires that the full allowance of the past — the £250 and £400 — is not available, what consideration will the Minister give to the Executive funding it? Has he costed it? If so, what would it cost, and is it possible? As the Member for East Belfast said, if the House is to be about anything, it has to be about delivery. Is there a prospect for that? Has he costed what is asked for in the amendment, or is that just an unimaginable, indefinable figure?

Mr McCausland: The Member raised that point in an intervention earlier in the debate, and it is one that I will address in due course.

Alex Maskey talked about the fuel poverty strategy and the need for the road map. The new fuel poverty strategy outlines specific actions that we believe are achievable. Officials will brief the Committee on Thursday 22 September. In advance of that, officials have provided an update on each of the 14 actions that are detailed in the strategy. I am very keen to work with the Committee in addressing these issues.

A number of other points were raised by Members. I am sure that Mr Allister is aware of the announcement that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) is looking at what can be done to address fuel issues over the winter period. I understand that that work is ongoing, and I am sure that there will be an announcement in due course. The Member should take note of the fact that that was announced several weeks ago.

I met the Age Sector Platform to discuss the issue, and I took on board its concerns. We suggest that more could be done, maybe with its assistance and co-operation, to help older folk to become more aware of the benefits that are available. It has a very good network of age sector organisations and takes it down to the level of local senior citizens' groups. There is a marvellous opportunity there, and that is a good way of getting information out to older people.

Michael Copeland asked for an update on the pilot boiler replacement scheme. Some £2 million has been set aside for a boiler replacement scheme. The scheme offers a grant of up to £1,500 towards the cost of installing a new energy-efficient boiler. The rationale for the scheme was to offer assistance to those who had previously missed out on government assistance. All those potentially eligible applicants have been contacted, and we have resources available to assist approximately 1,330 householders. If there is scope left within the budget, we will look at assisting other vulnerable groups.

I will pick up on some other points that were raised. Mr Copeland asked whether we were serious. I can assure him that we are serious. In fact, I am surprised that he even posed the question. Of course we are serious about it: it is a serious issue for many homes right across

the Province. He also asked whether it was honest to pose the question in the motion or to say that we can do nothing, as Westminster is liable to say no. Westminster is indeed liable to say no. His colleague Mr Swann said that he had hoped that I would have raised the issue with the coalition Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government at Westminster. I could say that I would have hoped that he, as a member of a party that campaigned as Conservatives and Unionists, would have raised the issue with his Conservative colleagues already. He said that the response was inadequate. *[Interruption.]* It is obviously important for some people down there to do more listening. He said that it was an inadequate response.

It is true that we would like to do more, but, as one of my colleagues mentioned, we have had £4 billion taken out of the Northern Ireland Budget over the four-year period of the comprehensive spending review by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition Government. There are, therefore, limitations on what can be done but, within the limitations, we will certainly do all that we can and make it a priority.

Alban Maginness said that £20 million for the green new deal was not enough. He is not here any more. In a sense, that is true, but, again, there are financial constraints with £4 billion taken out of the Budget. If he is suggesting that perhaps his party colleague in the Department of the Environment (DOE) is happy to surrender more money so that we can put more into those schemes, I would be happy for Alban — perhaps colleagues would pass the message on to him — to lobby his colleague Mr Attwood. If more money were available, we could certainly make good use of it.

Mrs Cochrane raised the issue of better technology. In recent weeks, I have visited a number of firms in Northern Ireland that are at the forefront of energy efficiency technology. It is good to know that we have companies that are not only helping to address issues of fuel poverty through technology but are helping Northern Ireland to increase employment by exporting that technology to many parts of the world.

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

Mr McCausland: I think that I have covered most of the points, and I am happy to leave the matter.

Mr Agnew: I welcome the Minister's comments on the work to date on the green new deal. I will speak a bit more about that later in my speech, but I dare say that he will not be surprised that I hope that more can be done and more money can be put into the green new deal programme. I also thank Mr Copeland for his correction: it is, of course, over 300,000 homes, not people, in Northern Ireland that suffer fuel poverty. I appreciate him pointing out that I got that one wrong.

Mr Copeland also highlighted the fact that there are two different definitions of fuel poverty. I warn against the more recent definition, which looks at the regional prices and the current prices of energy. If we keep moving to where the median is, no matter how high fuel prices go — even if they go as high as 100% of someone's income — according to the recent definition, that would mean that families who spend all their money on fuel may not be classed as living in fuel poverty, which seems to me somewhat bizarre. I appreciate the Minister's point that it helps us to see where the most severe instances of fuel poverty are, but we should work with the wider definition.

Robin Swann highlighted the important fact that what we are doing is clearly not working. Fuel poverty is on the rise, and we need to do something more or something different. As I pointed out earlier, each year, as energy prices go up, the winter fuel payment has less and less value to householders as the amount of oil, gas or other fuel that they can purchase decreases. Without energy efficiency measures, the winter fuel payment literally sends money up in smoke.

I appreciate the fact that the Minister highlighted the work that is taking place. However, we need not only cross-departmental working but the finance to back it up, in what I refer to as pooled budgets. It is fine and well that Ministers have input to what should be done, but, if money — or at least initiatives — does not come from the Departments, that cross-departmental working will just be lip service. Pooled budgets are necessary across a number of areas in the Assembly and are certainly necessary on the issue of fuel poverty.

I will move to the green new deal, which is the focus of my amendment. As Judith Cochrane

pointed out, we have many initiatives to tackle fuel poverty, but they are disparate. The green new deal will provide a one-stop shop where people can find all the advice that they require in one place to help to address their difficulties in meeting fuel payments.

I will answer Mr Allister's question about how much it will cost. The Green New Deal Group's original business plan highlighted the fact that £72 million of public spending would invite £181 million of private sector spending. I know that the group is revising the plan to meet the Department's standards. The same people who say that we cannot afford that also say that we should cut corporation tax, which would mean upwards of £300 million coming out of the public sector spend. My argument is that we should scrap the idea of cutting corporation tax and put the money in invest-to-save schemes to prevent problems such as fuel poverty, which has such a detrimental effect on the health of our society.

By investing in the green new deal, we can create thousands of jobs, reduce carbon emissions and, most importantly in this debate, tackle fuel poverty. We cannot afford to pass up this opportunity to make an investment that will create extra private sector support, boost the economy and have beneficial social impacts. I call on the House to support the amendment and thank Members for giving me this time.

Mr Frew: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak on the motion. I thank Members for their general support. The debate has addressed the wider issues around fuel poverty, and rightly so. At this time, it is an important issue in our country and for our people.

The Member for North Antrim Mr McIlveen and I tabled the motion: it is simple in nature and targeted. Many times in the past year, I have sat in the Chamber and heard motions being debated that represent what could be described as Utopia, somewhere we would like to be or aspire to be but cannot really get to. We are asking the Minister to perform a simple task on behalf of the Assembly for the people of Northern Ireland, which is to lobby and persuade Her Majesty's Government to reverse their decision on winter fuel payments.

The motion is simple and specific because, at the recent Pensioners Parliament, the most popular motion relating to energy prices was, in

fact, to do with the winter fuel cut. Almost 97% of those who attended those events asked the Government to reverse their decision. We are talking about cuts of only £50 and £100, but that is how desperate the most vulnerable in society are. In the greater scheme of things, they could have asked for something that would be very hard to adopt, but they are simply asking for the decision to be reversed. Of course, £50 and £100 will not solve many issues, but, for one or two people, it might be the difference between life and death, which is a point that I want the Minister to take across to Westminster.

2.15 pm

I acknowledge the Minister's commitment to tackling the serious issue of fuel poverty. Mr McIlveen and I invited the Minister to come to Ballymena last Thursday, when we talked about issues such as town centre regeneration and social housing areas. The Minister saw at first hand the deprivation that there can be in a highly successful town such as Ballymena, where people drive in and out along main thoroughfares to shop and for employment and recreation yet sometimes drive by deprivation on the grandest scale without seeing it. It is fair to say that Ballymena has some well-kept secrets, one of which is the scale of deprivation in some areas. I am sure that the Minister's eyes were opened to Ballymena. He represents North Belfast, which also has those issues, but he saw at first hand how Ballymena could also come into that category. I thank him for his time last Thursday. His visit will be very useful when I go to him about such issues, because he has seen what I am talking about. I warn him that my visit is just round the corner.

I acknowledge the action taken by DSD, the Minister for Social Development and his predecessor on the £2 million boiler replacement scheme, which will benefit 1,300 successful applicants. I should also mention the capital funding for the warm homes scheme of £15 million, £15.5 million, £16 million and £16.5 million over the next four years, which will be spent on private sector houses. In addition, this year, the Housing Executive will spend £16 million from its maintenance budget on fuel poverty measures, including heating adaptations, heating replacements and thermal comfort improvements. All of that adds up to helping people. People will say that we could do more, and, of course, we could, but I remind Members that we underwent a very difficult Budget process, during which we debated

those same issues. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. We have to think of the full spectrum of government and of the Province as a whole. Therefore, I commend the Minister and his Department for their work to date.

In fuel poverty, we face a dangerous and fast-moving enemy. In the past two years, the cost of heating oil has risen by over 63%. On 1 October, electricity prices will rise by 18.6%. In greater Belfast, gas prices have risen by 39%, and, in the 10 towns area, which I represent, they will rise by 28% on 1 October. Coal prices are also set to rise this month by up to 10%, and the price of liquified petroleum gas (LPG) rose by 9% in August. All that while annual salaries have been frozen or, worse, cut by up to 15% in some households and, worse still, people have lost their job. I know that the motion refers specifically to the elderly, but we must also remember that the issue affects those at the other extreme — the young and their families. Of course, when families are supported, they will, in turn, support their elderly and loved ones.

I cannot understand Her Majesty's Government's decision to cut the payment. It is not logical to cut £50 from the payment of those in the age range 60-79 while the over 80s are to expect a cut of £100. That just does not add up. Her Majesty's coalition Government have used twisted logic to implement that cut. We can argue about the standards of fuel poverty, the bar set and the criteria used. However, it does not matter whether the qualifications change from one day to another: the people, the householders and the elderly folk affected by fuel poverty will still be in the same scenario. There should be logic in the Government's decision and in the measurement of fuel poverty. That would mean that we would be able to target the 13% of people who will be affected most by fuel poverty and for whom it could well mean the difference between life and death.

From talking to elderly folk in my constituency, I know that they have been extremely worried over the summer months. However, they are not worried about what they are going to spend their money on or what they are going to buy their grandchildren for Christmas. They are not worried about dipping into their savings or about their mobility once the frost comes or whether they will damage a hip or break a leg. Those are the things that elderly folk normally worry about, but they are not worried about those things any more. They are worried about whether they will see March. That is the important issue

on which the Assembly must focus its mind. Many Members spoke about how many people die each year because of the cold in the winter months. My colleague Mr McIlveen and I tabled the motion to ask the Minister to do a simple task.

I acknowledge the amendment proposed by Mr Agnew. I understand, from his policies and politics, why he moved it. It does not fit well with the motion because it targets a specific task, but I understand why he has put it forward, and I understand about the green new deal. We will, of course, be sympathetic to it and its long-term strategy. However, things have to move in that regard. Mr Agnew knows that I come from the construction industry. I know that things have to change, even in that industry, to make that work. Simply asking any Minister or Department to throw more money at it will not achieve the objectives of the green new deal. That is what concerns me most: we must make sure that the vehicle is in place to make those objectives workable. It is with grave concern that we are at this point, but I am not sure whether the green new deal has got that far yet. He talked about equipment going into households, but it is not affordable for ordinary people.

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

Mr Frew: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the serious problem of fuel poverty, especially amongst older people; acknowledges the adverse impact that rising fuel bills are likely to have on the ability of older people to keep warm and healthy; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to make representations to Her Majesty's Government to continue to support Age Sector Platform's call to maintain this year's winter fuel payment at its current level of £250 for pensioner households where someone is aged between 60 and 79, and £400 where someone is aged 80 and over; and further calls on the Minister to increase funding for the green new deal to provide the energy efficiency measures required to tackle fuel poverty in the long term.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time.

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

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Finance and Personnel

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 4 has been transferred to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and will receive a written answer. Question 13 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

Civil Service: Equal Pay

1. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline what discussions he has had with trade unions and other representative groups in relation to equal pay settlements for civil servants. (AQO 309/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): In the run-up to the determination of the final settlement of the equal pay issue, I met with the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) representatives on two occasions, in October and November 2009, and my predecessor met with NIPSA in May 2009.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister ensure that the Department engages in genuine negotiation with representatives of all groups affected to reach a satisfactory outcome? Can he give us an idea of a cut-off point at which this no longer is an issue?

Mr Wilson: All the groups that were affected under the Civil Service scheme have been met, and, as far as we are concerned, the remit of the Department of Finance and Personnel was to deal with members of the Civil Service who had an equal pay claim. That has been dealt with. The lump sum has been paid and the new pay grades have been introduced. Some others have put in equal pay claims. That is an issue for their employer, which will be either the Department of Justice or an arm's-length body. It is for them to determine whether there is a pay claim.

Mrs D Kelly: How many civil servants, including retirees, are involved in the equal pay claim? If he is not able to provide the figures today,

perhaps he will give an undertaking to provide them at a later date.

Mr Wilson: The retirees were not part of the agreement. Those who retired six months previous to when the equal pay claim was lodged would not have been eligible under the law. I have made it clear on a number of occasions in the Assembly that that issue is closed. I know that some who left the Civil Service six months before the claim was lodged feel that they are entitled to it, and some MLAs agree. I have not been told how far back one would go. Secondly, there would be an issue with the details of those particular individuals, and, thirdly, the further back one went, the more it would cost. How would we deal with the cost? It is one thing for Members to say that retirees should generally be covered by it, but we can deal only with pay claims that have some legal standing. The legal advice is very clear: those who left six months before the claim was lodged are not eligible.

Mr Copeland: Will the Minister comment on the current situation, particularly on the breach-of-contract cases being taken by civil servants employed by the Police Service of Northern Ireland?

Mr Wilson: PSNI staff, we believe, are and should be excluded from the Northern Ireland Civil Service pay claim. Their pay delegation went to the NIO in 1996. PSNI staff are now under the Department of Justice, and the responsibility for their pay rests with their current employer. My officials and I have had discussions with the Department of Justice and the PSNI to explain the situation. In their own organisation, there may well be grounds for an equal pay claim. However, staff have to justify that by the determining whether there is a difference between those at administrative assistant and administration officer grades and those at some other technical grade and, if so, whether that difference constitutes an equal pay claim. If that is the case, it is for the Department of Justice and the police to deal with, but the Civil Service scheme was clear: it covered only those whose pay the Department of Finance and Personnel was responsible for — that is, members of the Civil Service.

Mr Allister: On another, different dimension of equal pay: a pay freeze is supposed to be in operation across the Civil Service. Why then, on 18 July, did the Minister pick out one section

of supposed civil servants — political special advisers — and give them a freeze-busting increase of £7,500 at the upper end of band B? Why did he do the First Minister's bidding in that regard and wreak havoc with the pay freeze that is supposed to apply to civil servants?

Mr Wilson: The Member seems very interested in everybody else's pay. I could take that from some other Members. He does not like this: but, this is the Member who goes to court to keep his own pay — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister has been asked a question and is giving his reply. May we have order in the Chamber, please?

Mr Wilson: You see, the Member does not like the truth being told. He loves to point the finger. He loves to posture. He loves to blame everybody else and to identify what he believes are the faults of everybody else. He would have a bit more credibility if he were prepared to show some transparency about the money that he gets from the public purse, instead of looking at the money that other people get or he believes that they get.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member take his seat? No points of order are taken during Question Time. You may raise the matter later, if you wish. I call Alasdair McDonnell with the next question.

Dr McDonnell: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will be a bit more restrained than heretofore.

Infrastructure Funding

2. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what consideration his Department has given to issuing bonds to fund essential infrastructure. (AQO 310/11-15)

Mr Wilson: OK. *[Laughter.]* I thank the Member, and we know of his customary restraint, although I am sure that he will not be as restrained in his battle for the leadership of the party. *[Laughter.]* I am sure that he will be fairly robust when it comes to that. I was going to wish him all the best, but that may be the death knell for him, so I will not. *[Laughter.]* I will refrain from that.

The issue of issuing a bond has come up time and time again and has been looked at by officials as part of schemes to try to identify ways of bringing additional spending into the public sector for projects that have not been financed through our departmental expenditure limit allocation or the sale of assets.

I have explained the difficulty with this issue to the House on a number of occasions. The difficulty is that, if the Executive borrow money, the Treasury takes that to be part of the borrowing for the whole of the United Kingdom, and, if borrowing targets are set, the Treasury simply reduces the money that is given to Northern Ireland in accordance with the amount borrowed. That would not benefit us. In fact, if anything, it would be detrimental, because money that we get in for capital spending as part of the block grant, with no interest attached, would be replaced with borrowing on which we would have to pay interest. That is the difficulty around the bond issue. So, it really would not be of any benefit to us. Although, I have no doubt that, were it possible to issue bonds that do not have such an impact, we could raise additional capital because people would be prepared to invest in them.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for that answer. As I look out there, I am frustrated because the whole construction industry is paralysed. Yet, a lot of essential infrastructure could be put in place at current rates if we could borrow money to do so. Let us look, for instance, at schools. We need a number of schools. We could probably get them at 20% of a discount on what they may cost in five years' time.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Would the Member ask his question, please?

Dr McDonnell: Are there other ways? If we cannot raise money at Executive level, could the education and library boards, local councils or others find ways and means of doing so?

Mr Wilson: I thought that when the Member said that he was "frustrated", he was inviting me to give an answer similar to that of the Prime Minister, but I assure him that I will not.

The Member is right. I have had discussions with the Construction Employers Federation. I am still waiting for a paper from the federation on alternative ways in which it could bring additional funding to the table. The Member

rightly identified that, at this time, many of the infrastructure projects that we know must be undertaken — schools, investment in the health service, roads, or whatever — could be done much more cheaply today than in two or three years' time when the economy picks up. One way of looking at the situation is to determine whether we can, through private investment initiatives, get building done for the public sector. Can the construction industry itself find ways of raising money? Indeed, and this will be a painful choice for the Assembly, are there ways in which we can divorce from the public sector some of the bodies that need capital spend to get the required work done, so that we could use the revenue streams that they would generate? In housing, for example, we could increase rents, which could provide an income stream against which borrowing could be obtained. However, we would then have to move housing out of the public sector and into some arm's-length body.

Mr G Kelly: Will the Minister provide an assessment of the cost to the Executive of issuing bonds? You said earlier that you were against that option, but have you made that assessment?

Mr Wilson: It would depend on the rate of interest on the bond market at that time. That, in turn, would depend on our credit rating as an Executive and what rate of interest UK bonds in general would attract. At present, because of the United Kingdom's AAA rating, the rate of interest for UK Government borrowing is very low compared with that for the Republic, Italy and other places. Some might say that that is the result of the budgetary policies that the Westminster Government are following. However, at any particular time, the market will determine that.

Mrs Overend: I want to pick up on a point raised by Dr McDonnell. Will the Minister advise whether local authorities have the necessary powers to raise similar bonds or mortgages to assist their development?

Mr Wilson: Yes, local authorities have the power to raise money and borrow in that way, and that does not score against our departmental expenditure limit or become part of the total borrowing sum that the Treasury set down. Of course, their problem is that they have a limited range of things on which they can spend the money. Also, some of them may be more

cautious about doing that than others, because the repayment of interest over the period would, of course, have a revenue consequence for ratepayers. However, local authorities are one set of bodies that could borrow, and their borrowing would not score against our departmental expenditure limit.

Small Business Rate Relief Scheme

3. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the small business rate relief scheme. (AQO 311/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Department has been consulting on the proposals to expand the main scheme of the small business rate relief scheme. Given the constrained public finances at present, we believe that that increase can be funded only from something other than public expenditure. That is why we proposed a levy on larger retail premises. That levy requires new legislation, and if we are to have it in place by April 2012, which is the aim, it will require accelerated passage. The scheme is designed to last for three years. It is a recession response from the Executive. It is not something that we see as going beyond the three-year period.

2.45 pm

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for the update on the scheme. What other mechanisms is the Minister pursuing to assist small businesses at this time?

Mr Wilson: We already have the rate relief scheme for small businesses. The proposal that we have out for consultation, which will finish on 18 October, will double the number of businesses brought into the scheme. However, a number of other schemes and initiatives are being introduced to help small businesses. For instance, the Department for Social Development is promoting a lot of regeneration schemes for town centres, and the Department for Regional Development is doing work to enhance street landscapes to improve such areas. Of course, we still have the manufacturing rate relief for many of the small manufacturing businesses, which is capped at 30%. That is designed to reduce the overheads of some of the smaller manufacturing businesses.

Mr Campbell: Given that a number of small businesses are just starting out in some towns and are trying to compete with large businesses

located at the edge of town or out of town, will the Minister outline the type of business that might benefit from the scheme? Will he indicate the level of support that might be provided?

Mr Wilson: We have not restricted the scheme to any particular type of business. It is designed to capture businesses that have a rateable value of £10,000 or less. Some people have argued that it could be better targeted and that we should be selecting particular types of businesses. However, since this is to be a three-year scheme, since we had wanted to keep the administration costs to an absolute minimum, because we want the money to go to businesses and not to an expensive administration system, and since there is always a difficulty if the onus is on a business to apply rather than having an automatic deduction of money from the business's rates, we have gone for what some people might describe as a fairly blunt instrument. We believe it is the quickest way of getting help to small businesses. It provides 20% rate relief for businesses with a valuation between £10,000 and £5,000 and 50% for those with a rateable value of £5,000 or less.

Mr McDevitt: Although I am sure that all Members welcome the sentiments the Minister is expressing in the Chamber, does the Minister accept that, ultimately, we will have to be a lot more radical about addressing some of the significant structural issues facing many small businesses? Will the Minister express an opinion on whether it may require the option of a rating model that is related to the turnover of the business rather than to the rental income or value of the property?

Mr Wilson: In the proposals, we have invited businesses to make other suggestions that they believe would be more effective than the suggestions that I have made in the policy document. I am not wedded to one particular idea merely because it came from me. If someone comes up with a different or better idea, or one that is more effective or cost-effective, it will be considered. The difficulty with the suggestion that the Member for South Belfast has made is that it is difficult to get a clear picture of the turnover of some businesses. It would be much more open to manipulation. At least there is an objective database of the valuation of a business. Turnover can be manipulated in different ways. For that reason, we have not considered that

suggestion. However, we are looking at any credible suggestions that come forward for the short term and, more importantly, for the longer term, and we will continue to do so.

Mr Swann: Have the major retail outlets responded positively to the consultation process?

Mr Wilson: I have met all the major retailers — Tesco, Asda and Sainsbury's — and the British Retail Consortium, and, to be fair, I think that they have not been madly enthusiastic about the scheme. However, I will point out that the proposal affects about 100 businesses across Northern Ireland, which account for about 1% of the total number of retailers in Northern Ireland. The levy will work out at about 0.25% of their turnover. It is, of course, a temporary measure for the next three years. When it is explained in those terms, it becomes and is seen to be less onerous than perhaps some of them have depicted it. However, nobody votes for an extra increase in any tax, so you would expect the major retailers to have been fairly critical of the proposal.

Corporation Tax

5. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the discussions he has had with Her Majesty's Treasury on the devolution of corporation tax. (AQO 313/11-15)

12. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the discussions he has had with Treasury regarding the devolution of corporation tax. (AQO 320/11-15)

Mr Wilson: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 5 and 12 together.

The Government consultation closed early in July, and there have been over 700 responses to it. I cannot give the Assembly the breakdown of those responses at present. The Chancellor has indicated that the Government will respond some time in the autumn, and we are currently considering the responses that the Treasury has received. Of course, there is a lot of work to be done in determining the amount that this would cost, as well as in determining other factors that might help to mitigate the cost.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for his answer. What is his opinion of whether full control over corporation tax should be devolved to Northern

Ireland or whether our involvement should be limited to setting the rate of tax?

Mr Wilson: I do not think that there is any point in our replicating the administrative arrangements that are already in place. We had a couple of meetings with Treasury Ministers at which representatives of business and accountancy firms were present. They indicated that that really would not be to their advantage and, indeed, that most firms would probably resist having to deal with a separate administrative arrangement in Northern Ireland as well as with the Treasury, especially those firms that may have outlets here and in the rest of GB. So, it is my view that the administrative arrangements should still be carried out by Her Majesty's Treasury and that we then pay for that. What the cost of that administration should be is an area for negotiation. Currently, we have been given a figure that I think is ridiculously high, and we have to look at that.

As far as the devolution of the rate is concerned, that will be a decision for the Assembly.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister give an indication as to whether the North will be designated an enterprise zone for that?

Mr Wilson: I assume that the Member means Northern Ireland. *[Interruption.]*

The Government have designated a number of areas in other parts of the United Kingdom as enterprise zones. I am still not quite clear as to what exactly they mean by an enterprise zone in relation to Northern Ireland. At one stage, the Secretary of State felt that the whole of Northern Ireland could be an enterprise zone. I do not think that that is really a practical proposition, but we will look at what is happening with enterprise zones in other parts of the United Kingdom and at what allowances there are for planning and capital and so on. Whether that is an appropriate model in a place such as Northern Ireland, I do not know. Our past experience of enterprise zones has been that they do not generate additional employment; it is more a case of displacement, with firms moving from one side of the line to the other. I am not so sure that that would be a satisfactory way forward.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his answers so far.

The Minister has outlined as best he can, without giving too much detail, the outcome of the consultation. Will he outline what other fiscal measures, other than an adjustment to the rate of corporation tax, would make Northern Ireland a more attractive area for investment?

Mr Wilson: A number of things have been discussed time and again in the Assembly. Businesses come to me all the time to talk about the cost of regulation. We really ought to look at that. One of the things that heartens me about the current problems in the euro zone is the prospect that we may well be able to renegotiate our relationship with Europe and get rid of many costly regulations that are very often irrelevant, tie the hands of business in Northern Ireland, and about which the Assembly can do nothing because they are passed down to us. That is one thing that could be done.

Arlene Foster is already looking at tax credits for research and development, and investment allowances. Firms in Northern Ireland are already benefiting from the reduction in National Insurance contributions. I asked a question of the Treasury Minister the other week and I was pleased to find out that about 20 firms in my own constituency benefit from that. That brings down the cost of labour.

There is another big issue. I hope that the Minister of the Environment will not be diverted by his pursuit of the leadership of the SDLP but will get down to doing something about the planning system. I am sure that the Minister will look at what can be done to reduce that burden and enable business decisions to be made much more quickly as a result of quicker planning decisions.

Mr Agnew: When alternative proposals are put to the Minister in Budget debates, he is often heard to ask how we are we supposed to pay for them. Given the huge expense of the deduction from the Northern Ireland block grant if devolution of corporation tax were to take place, will he please outline how he proposes to pay for that? Will it be by top-slicing? If so, will that include health, education and justice? Will we get to a level of top-slicing that is more like cutting the middle right out of our Government Departments?

Mr Wilson: The Member raises a good point. I have been at the forefront in saying that we cannot accept the devolution of corporation tax if it will have a massive impact on our current

spending. One of the reasons why there have to be very hard negotiations with the Treasury over the autumn is to make sure that we do not get a bill for the devolution of corporation tax that is totally unsustainable. No provision has been made in the current four-year Budget for the devolution of corporation tax, so even if we got the bill down to a manageable figure, there would still be an impact, unless it is phased in or deferred.

Many people argue that the certainty that the tax rate will be down to a certain level by a certain time will influence investment decisions. As there is a long lead-in for investment decisions, I do not believe that we will see a reduction in the rate of corporation tax within the lifetime of this Assembly. It will come after that.

DFP: Procurement

6. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of whether the procurement system currently used by the Central Procurement Directorate is of benefit to small and medium-sized enterprises.

(AQO 314/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for the question. It is best answered by citing some of the statistics. Between May 2008 and November 2010, 73% of all contracts issued by the Central Procurement Directorate went to small and medium-sized enterprises. I am not complacent about that. Small and medium-sized enterprises are usually the kinds of firm that are based in Northern Ireland, and we want to encourage them.

The Member will understand that, again, our hands are tied by European directives about competition, etc. We see many judicial reviews of procurement processes. However, we seek to maximise the procurement opportunities for smaller businesses and we have implemented, for example, the eSourcing single portal, which small businesses can log onto and which lists all government opportunities worth over £30,000, so that businesses can see if there is an opportunity for them. We have looked at how we can simplify the process and the paperwork involved in tendering.

3.00 pm

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mr Deputy Speaker: For Members' information, question 4 has been withdrawn and will require a written answer.

Community Pharmacies: Remuneration

1. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he has any plans to review the drugs tariff formula used to pay pharmacies. (AQO 324/11-15)

11. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of whether there will be a detrimental impact on service delivery as a result of the proposed 30% cut in the community pharmacy budget. (AQO 334/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I will answer questions 1 and 11 together.

The Department recognises the fact that it has an obligation to provide fair and reasonable remuneration for community pharmacies. In January 2010, the High Court found that arrangements in place at that time did not meet that obligation. Thereafter, the Department and the Health and Social Care (HSC) Board engaged in extensive negotiations with Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland (CPNI) in an attempt to reach agreement on community pharmacy arrangements in 2011-12. However, agreement could not be reached.

New arrangements were introduced with effect from 1 April 2011 to meet my Department's ongoing statutory obligation to provide fair and reasonable remuneration. CPNI has brought a further judicial review challenge to the new remuneration and reimbursement arrangements, and, against that background, it would be inappropriate for me to comment further on community pharmacy remuneration in case it would have any prejudicial effect on the hearing, which is scheduled for 20 and 21 September. I do not accept, however, the assertions that are being made by CPNI, and I assure Members that I am committed to providing — indeed, I am required by law to provide — a

fair and reasonable system of remuneration to community pharmacists in Northern Ireland.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he accept the fact that pharmacies play a crucial role in providing healthcare and advice in rural communities?

Mr Poots: Absolutely. Very often, they are in the front line, and I therefore remain committed to ensuring that we have strong, community-based pharmacies. I should say that we are dealing with something that was brought about under the previous Administration. The judicial review was sought under the previous Administration, and leave for it was granted in that period. Therefore, I have been somewhat constrained in dealing with the issue, which causes me some concern. I appeal again to the community pharmacists' organisation to withdraw its judicial review and allow negotiations to take place.

Mrs D Kelly: If we accept that there will be a detrimental impact on pharmacy services across Northern Ireland, will the Minister undertake to maintain a geographical spread of pharmacies so that the impact of any reduction is not borne by rural communities in particular?

Mr Poots: Currently, in Northern Ireland, per head of population, there are 100 more pharmacies than in any other part of the United Kingdom. We have 30 pharmacists for every 100,000 head of population, whereas in England there are 21, in Scotland there are 23, and in Wales there are 24. Clearly, we have a considerable number of pharmacists. It is important that we continue to have pharmacists in our rural villages and in deprived areas, which is why I am happy to negotiate with pharmacists. However, I cannot negotiate in circumstances in which a judicial review is pending.

Mr Craig: Does the Minister find it appropriate that people can get prescriptions for drugs that are commonly commercially available over the counter to anyone who wishes to purchase them?

Mr Poots: I have concerns about that. We intend to look at that issue because there is a problem. People are getting prescriptions for drugs such as antihistamines, Anadin and Brufen, which can easily be bought over the counter at a low cost. We have already issued guidelines on the use of glucosamine, for

example. We can make considerable savings by ensuring that people do not get those drugs on prescription but buy them over the counter without causing huge pain to the public purse.

I should make it clear that this Executive, this Assembly and this country spend around £460 million a year on pharmaceuticals. That is almost as much money as is spent by the entire Department for Regional Development. Therefore, we need to achieve better efficiencies in the system. We need to get value for money. We need to eradicate a lot of the waste of drugs that we buy and to maximise the amount of generics that we use. There is a lot of work to be done on that issue, and a lot of savings could be made. Community pharmacists perform an important role in the delivery of the health service in Northern Ireland. We do not want to make them the fall guys, but we need to make considerable savings in the budget.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister will know as well as everybody else in the Chamber that community pharmacists are anxious to get round the table and, as he said, to develop methods of discouraging waste. However, the Minister must acknowledge that allowing some pharmacies to close will undoubtedly put extra pressure on local GPs and on A&E units, which are already under threat. Can the Minister not recognise that that will be a consequence of closing pharmacies?

Mr Poots: I am not sure whether the Member has actually listened to anything that has been said thus far. The Minister can do nothing about the situation because a judicial review is pending. Therefore, the Minister cannot negotiate the deal that was brought about by the previous Minister in the previous Administration, and the leave was sought in the previous Administration. If I could engage with pharmacists, there would be potential to move the situation forward; however, while I am constrained by a judicial review, I cannot move this situation forward.

IVF Treatment

2. **Ms Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he has any plans to extend the IVF treatment cycle to three treatments. (AQO 325/11-15)

Mr Poots: Northern Ireland aspires to provide three full cycles of fertility treatment as

recommended by National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE); however, financial constraints make that unachievable. I am aware that in some areas of the UK the number of cycles available is increasing. However, it is worth noting that in many of those areas the NHS criteria for treatment are much more restrictive than those that we apply in Northern Ireland. Therefore, fewer couples receive any publicly funded treatment.

An additional £1.5 million of recurrent funding for fertility services was made available in 2009. That, in addition to an investment of £800,000 in a waiting list initiative, means that no patient now waits for more than 12 months for treatment from the time that they are placed on the waiting list. With that funding, it is hoped that it will also be possible to introduce a cycle of frozen embryo transfer in addition to the currently funded stimulated cycle of treatment where that is appropriate.

Ms Gildernew: I welcome the Minister's answer; the news about waiting lists is good. However, does he agree with statistics that indicate that there is a 60% chance of conceiving with a three-cycle approach? Notwithstanding financial constraints, it ultimately offers better value for money for the taxpayer.

Mr Poots: We recognise that. NICE has made its recommendations on the basis of its research, and we seek to follow the guidance from NICE as far as we can. However, the funding that has been set aside thus far does not allow for that. We are looking at the opportunity of introducing the second cycle treatment through frozen embryo transfers, which is a cost-effective way of achieving it. I recognise that we have come some distance, but we have not gone the full distance. However, at the moment I cannot make any promises, given the funding constraints.

Mrs Overend: Has the Minister considered the use of DuoFertility, which is a system based on detecting high fertility cycles in the body? It was developed by Cambridge Temperature Concepts and was outlined on the Cabinet Office website in May 2011. It has been shown to achieve the same pregnancy rate as a cycle of IVF in the same patient population at a cost of £500, compared to a typical NHS cost of £5,000 per cycle.

Mr Poots: What the Member says is very interesting, but we normally operate under NICE guidelines. That is the protocol under which

we operate. If the system is as good as the Member indicated, I trust that NICE would recommend it to us. It would certainly alleviate our problems.

Mr McDevitt: I am sure that the Minister, like the rest of us, will want to acknowledge the huge emotional impact and stress placed on couples who do not get access to a third cycle. How many patients in this region are awaiting treatment?

Mr Poots: We do not have the figures for how many are on the waiting list. I will seek to ascertain that, provided that it can be done for a reasonable cost.

Hospitals: Missed Appointments

3. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures he intends to introduce to reduce the level of missed hospital appointments. (AQO 326/11-15)

Mr Poots: In the previous financial year, 171,740 outpatients missed their hospital appointments without cancelling in advance. They simply did not attend. It must be acknowledged that, to avoid such a waste of resources, the public have a responsibility to ensure that they cancel hospital appointments in advance when they cannot attend.

Between 2008-09 and 2010-11, a reduction of some 13,000 missed appointments has been secured. However, there remains room for improvement. The trusts have therefore implemented key initiatives to reduce the number of missed and cancelled appointments. Those initiatives include setting local "Did not attend" targets for locations and specialities with high non-attendance rates; introducing partial booking across all outpatient specialities and extending that to patients who are waiting for review appointments; developing pathways that reduce unnecessary follow-up appointments; and the production of an annual report by the trusts providing an analysis of the root causes and demographics of non-attendance, together with performance against local "Did not attend" targets. The Department and HSC Board will review those reports and take further follow-up action as necessary.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for his answer. On the issue of key initiatives, I wonder whether the Minister has considered the use of modern communication techniques, such as mobile

phone texting and e-mails. I understand that the health authority in Fife has pioneered that and was saving something like £110 for each missed appointment. If your figure of 171,000 for missed appointments is correct, we are talking about a potential saving of £17 million.

Mr Poots: A pilot system was in place in the Belfast Trust between April and June, but I have to say that it had limited impact and was not particularly successful. However, I am keen to have another look at that and to maybe attempt another pilot. I recognise that an awful lot of groups with a large user base use text messaging to get messages out there, and I know that many dentists use it with their clients. So, it is something that I am prepared to look at again. There was a pilot, but it was not successful. However, perhaps we need to look at how that was implemented to see why it was not successful. I should add that there is a degree of overbooking, because hospitals know that there will be fallout and that not everybody will turn up. So, the cost of missed appointments probably is not as much as the headline figures might suggest.

Mr Newton: My concern is very much the same as that which Mike Nesbitt raised in his supplementary question. Can the Minister tell us whether the situation with missed appointments is worse in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the United Kingdom?

Mr Poots: We do not have figures for the number of missed appointments in the rest of the United Kingdom. However, the headline figure out today showing that over 170,000 appointments are missed is not satisfactory, and we need to look at what we should do about that. I think that, if you are going to attempt to do something about it, you would have to use a carrot and stick approach. We would therefore need to ensure that the public were well informed, on the one hand, about appointments and the proper use of electronic mail and text systems and, on the other, about the potential for being fined if they did not turn up. That is how dentists operate: if you do not turn up, you pay at your next appointment. If we were to challenge this, we would have to take those routes.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In introducing these measures, will you take into account particular circumstances and cases, such as people with bad eyesight? Is

it standard for appointment cards to have large print?

3.15 pm

Mr Poots: Those issues do exist. I accept that, sometimes, when people do not turn up, it is not necessarily their fault. However, 61% of people who did not turn up for an appointment had forgotten; 16% felt embarrassed about going to the outpatient clinic; 13% did not think that it was important; and 10% tried to cancel by telephone but could not get through. Members can take from those figures that the core problem is people who fall into the categories of either forgetting that they have an appointment or not thinking that it is important. That is not good enough.

Ulster Hospital: Accident and Emergency

5. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what actions have been taken to ensure that the closure of Belfast City Hospital's accident and emergency unit will not have an adverse impact on patients of the Ulster Hospital. (AQO 328/11-15)

Mr Poots: I wish to emphasise that changes in the configuration of emergency services in the Belfast Trust are operational matters that have been taken on the grounds of patient safety and the sustainability of services. In my statement to the Assembly on 13 September 2011, I acknowledged that the temporary closure of the Belfast City Hospital emergency department on 1 November 2011 would impact on hospitals in other trusts, including the Ulster Hospital. That hospital has a busy emergency department. It is anticipated that it may have an additional 10,000 attendances per annum as a result of the change. The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust is instigating a number of measures to address that challenge. They include recruitment of an additional three emergency department consultants, two of whom will be in place on 1 November; an increase in observation bed capacity; and the provision of additional nursing, allied health professional and support staff. Some minor works are also in hand at the Ulster Hospital. Those works include upgrading and bringing back into use a disused ward and creating a clinical decision unit. All those measures will help to accelerate patient flow to meet the current and anticipated increase in demand.

Mr Hamilton: I know that the Minister appreciates that the Ulster Hospital's A&E department is already a busy unit. As he said, it is expected to get much busier as a result of the closure of the City Hospital's A&E department. Will he assure me, the House and people in the South Eastern Trust area that the trust's ongoing work at the Ulster Hospital will ensure that any resulting impact on other services in the hospital, such as surgery, is also addressed?

Mr Poots: The South Eastern Trust is well aware of those matters. That is why it has appointed new emergency department consultants quite early. The creation of the clinical decision unit will help to determine where people go after their initial assessment in the emergency department and will assist us in service delivery. As things stand, the Ulster Hospital has the largest emergency department, based on turnover of patients and admissions. It is important that it continues to operate effectively. Therefore, it is important that the entire hospital system operates effectively, because a ward closure can lead to all sorts of problems in the emergency department. That would be an unsatisfactory situation.

Dr McDonnell: The Minister seems to have the Ulster Hospital reasonably well programmed for the closure of the City Hospital's emergency department. However, has the Minister considered the sheer implications for the Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH)? The RVH already deals, I am told, with 70,000 patients each year in a temporary building. The new critical care building will not open for at least 18 months — possibly two years — so you can anticipate some 30,000 extra patients coming to the Royal as a result of the closure of the City Hospital's emergency department. Has he made any provision, or can he give the House any comfort or reassurance that there will be plans in place to ensure that people are not queuing for hours?

Mr Poots: Yes. I thank the Member for his question. We have identified that the Royal Victoria Hospital will experience stress as a result of the additional number of patients. To deal with that, there will be a completely new nine-bed short-stay unit in the emergency department. It will be open 24/7 for patients who require interventions with a length of stay that is less than 24 hours. In addition, there will be an acute medical admissions unit that

operates 24/7 for patients who need 24- to 48-hour lengths of stay. There is also a plan to relocate the eye casualty to alternative accommodation, which will create more space for A&E. Those changes, together with the enhanced arrangements for ambulatory care, will assist in meeting the additional pressures on the system at the Royal Victoria Hospital. In addition, the fact that staff are coming over from Belfast City Hospital will allow a much more effective decision-making role to be taken at that hospital, with people being dealt with more quickly.

One thing that we are looking at, although it has not been finalised, is the introduction of a GP to assist with triaging. That has happened in Manchester, and 20% of the people did not require A&E services. That helped considerably to deal with backlogs.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am interested in what the Minister said about the new, nine-bed short-stay unit in the Royal. He said that it will operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There is currently one that closes on a Friday afternoon.

Mr Poots: There are actually two facilities. The one you are referring to is for 24- to 48-hour stays and is really for people who have suffered head injuries, concussion and so forth. That facility means that the patients can be observed for a reasonable length of time and be allowed to go home without full admittance to hospital. It is the intention that that will become a 24/7 facility as well.

Cancer Treatments

6. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the number of cancer treatments available for use in Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the UK. (AQO 329/11-15)

Mr Poots: Cancer prevention and early intervention access to appropriate and effective treatment continue to be our biggest challenges, and they remain a high priority for my Department. Although around £22 million recurrently is spent on a range of cancer medicines here, I acknowledge that further improvement in the availability of NICE-approved medicines applicable to Northern Ireland is required.

In Northern Ireland, the drugs and therapeutics committee, led by the Northern Ireland Cancer Network, has a regional process for the prioritisation of new drugs and therapies. The committee includes clinical representation from oncology and haematology departments and offers clear advice and guidance to the Health and Social Care Board on priorities for the commissioning of cancer drugs. A new, revised process to speed up the applicability of NICE-approved drugs in Northern Ireland will be effective from 28 September 2011. In addition, I am exploring other options to increase the resources available to fund access to specialist medicine.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response. Can he tell the House any more about his plans for making more money available for cancer drugs in Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: Under NICE guidelines, we do not buy all the drugs for cancer that we could and that NICE recommends we should. The shortfall in funding is around £5 million, to cover drugs for cancer, cystic fibrosis, Crohn's disease and anti-TNF drugs for people who are suffering from arthritis.

What are we going to do about that? First, my intention is to bid in the monitoring round for funding for those drugs, because the current situation is inappropriate. I have been receiving correspondence from people who have cancer but are not getting treated with drugs that could have a life-saving impact. As an Executive, we need to respond to that. Secondly, if we were to fund it in the long term, given the funding pressures that we are under, we would need to introduce new and additional funding. I am looking at how that might be achieved. It is wrong that we are not treating everyone for cancer when the relevant drug is available. We are not buying those drugs, and I would like to be in a position to change that.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister give an assessment of some of the new cancer drugs that are due to be licensed?

Mr Poots: The figure involved for all the drugs that are approved by NICE is £5 million a year.

Mr Cree: As the Minister will know, Northern Ireland does not have an equivalent of England's cancer drugs fund. I am reliably informed that there are now 19 treatments that are denied to

Northern Ireland patients, because, on grounds of cost-effectiveness, Northern Ireland has no mechanism for accessing treatments that are not recommended by NICE. When will the Minister take action to address that, given that it would cost an estimated £5.8 million to help some 279 patients?

Mr Poots: Even treating the people who should be getting NICE-approved drugs would be good start. The last Assembly, the last Executive, the last Minister decided to offer free prescriptions. The cost was apparently to be £13 million; I think that it was closer to £30 million. We are not buying drugs at the cost of £5 million, and people are potentially losing their life as a result. That is why I am determined to investigate this thoroughly and to try to reach the point where we treat these people appropriately and with adequate care.

Mr P Ramsey: Minister, I acknowledge your role in promoting helping people with cancer. It is clearly a very emotive subject and one that we all have to face in the constituency office. Will the Minister outline to the House the number of people across Northern Ireland who are on a waiting list for treatment? Have the targets been met?

Mr Poots: We are dealing quickly and effectively with people on the waiting list for cancer treatments. For example, the radiotherapy unit and cancer centre at Belfast City Hospital has made a remarkable difference to the treatment that is offered, and people are being responded to in appropriate times. That facility needs to have more lines installed. I announced at the outset that investment would take place in the Belfast City Hospital cancer unit and we would then extend that to the north-west. So, we have a task to ensure that that continues to be the case, and that is why it was important that we made the investment at Altnagelvin.

Prisoners: Medication

7. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he is aware that 80 per cent of prisoners are on medication. (AQO 330/11-15)

Mr Poots: At 5 September 2011, 67% of all prisoners were on prescribed medication. The levels of prescribing at the three Northern Ireland prison establishments were HMP Maghaberry, 80%; HMP Magilligan, 58%; and

HMP Hydebank Wood, 38%. Those levels of prescribing reflect the fact that prisoners tend to have poorer physical and mental health than the population at large. The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust provides healthcare service at the three prison sites and is continually seeking to improve medicines management and to ensure that prisoners' assessed medical needs are appropriately met.

Mr McCartney: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. I understand that there is obviously doctor/patient confidentiality, but does the Department have any view or put in place any monitoring process to ensure that the high percentage of people on drugs in prison is monitored and we are assured that it is not a sort of medicine of first resort instead of last resort?

Mr Poots: I have to say that I am shocked by these figures, so I welcome the fact that the matter has been brought to our attention. I certainly will ask whether this high level of prescribing drugs to people in prison is necessary or whether it is suitable because prisoners are calmer as a result. In my view, however, prisons are reform institutions, and, if people are coming out of prison having received large quantities of prescription drugs as opposed to overcoming their problems, there is some degree of failing.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his answer thus far. Having given a guarantee to monitor, what will be the next steps in trying to reduce prescribing levels in our prisons?

Mr Poots: Having already posed the question, I am told that 90% of prisoners have a diagnosable mental health problem, substance misuse problem or both, and 27% have some other form of chronic disease. If 90% of prisoners have a mental health issue or a substance abuse issue already, it gives you an indication of why we are ending up with the figures we have. However, if we have reform institutions that are meant to bring people out of prisons better than they were when they went into them, we need to challenge this and how we are currently doing things.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, that concludes Question Time. Thank you. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments while we change our support staff.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

3.30 pm

Private Members' Business

Office of the Police Ombudsman

Mr Speaker: Order. Two amendments to the motion have been selected. Up to one hour and 45 minutes will be allowed for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes to wind. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to wind. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr G Kelly: I beg to move

That this Assembly welcomes the Criminal Justice Inspection report into the Office of the Police Ombudsman; and calls on the Minister of Justice to take the necessary measures to ensure that full confidence is restored in the office.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt ar an ábhar seo. I propose this motion on behalf of Sinn Féin.

Let me say at the outset that we, in tandem with everyone else in the Assembly, are very much for an ombudsman's office. However, it has to be an ombudsman's office that does its job, because it was at the centre of the very long negotiations on policing and accountability, and it is a crucial part of that. We are talking today not about the existence of the office but about confidence in the office. If there is no confidence, the office diminishes very fast.

We have now had three separate reports: the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) report; the Tony McCusker report, which the Minister called for; and the latest one, the Criminal Justice Inspection (CJI) report. All of those reports are damning. In the latest report, which is from the CJI, the lowering of independence is central to the findings. There was a lack of consistency, prioritisation and contact with families. Changes were made to reports at the last minute that were believed to deal with a lowering of criticism of the RUC at the time. We are told that the critical review team did not get all the information. We have found that there is mistrust in the senior management team and that senior members of

staff disassociated themselves with reports that they were integral in producing on the basis that they were being changed at the last minute.

This is not personal, but Al Hutchinson was at the helm during the period that the reports deal with. It is not a short period — three years. Therefore, the buck stops with him. When he appeared before the Justice Committee, he said that, in 44 years of public service, he had not seen anything like these difficulties. Yet, he decided not to go. As my colleague Raymond McCartney said at the same Committee meeting, there is no point in long goodbyes, because they do not work. Some people have used the term “lame duck”, but I do not think that it is appropriate in this case. In the Committee meeting, the ombudsman blamed everyone but himself. He is at the core of the difficulty, so it is worth saying that, the longer he stays, the more damage is done to the ombudsman's office. We want the ombudsman's office restored to what it should be. The difficulty is that he can and will contaminate all those who work and will have to continue working in the office.

I have met a number of families in the past week or so. After years of waiting, they are now left with more questions than they had before. Were intelligence reports withheld? Were the changes to reports made to protect people involved? Who can they turn to now? Their message to me was that they certainly could not turn to Al Hutchinson.

The motion is not about party politics; it is in the public interest and the interest of all of those who have a vested interest in the new beginning to policing. That is why we tabled the motion. It is an alert to the Assembly and its Members, and it is a challenge to the Minister of Justice. The Minister reports to the Committee for Justice and the Assembly on the day-to-day affairs of the Office of the Police Ombudsman. However, after listening carefully to all that he has said on the matter so far, I must now ask: what is he waiting for? For six months, we have been watching the Office of the Police Ombudsman spiral deeper into controversy, and, with every day, public confidence in the effectiveness of the office has been and continues to be eroded.

Yet, we now know that, at the beginning of this month, the Minister met the Police Ombudsman to discuss his position. What was the result?

The Police Ombudsman decided that he would stay in office and collect his, if I may say so, very substantial salary for another nine months. Let us be clear: that is one year and three months after the former chief executive had to resign to bring the scandal to public attention. That was a very big thing to do. I wish that the Police Ombudsman could follow in those footsteps. In all that time, the Minister has yet to state unequivocally that the person whom he pays so handsomely every month should quit.

There is an argument that we cannot create a vacuum and that the present ombudsman should wait for nine months. That, of course, is nonsense. It was argued that that is based in law, but that is also untrue. He should go for the sake of the office, and he should go now. Of all the measures that could be taken to restore public confidence in the Office of the Police Ombudsman, nothing is more important than having confidence in the person who is the Police Ombudsman. Every day that Al Hutchinson remains in post does damage to that office.

I will briefly deal with the SDLP's proposed amendment. We are in favour of it. I have just called on the Police Ombudsman to resign and have done so publicly before now. The DUP's amendment starts by stating that it:

"notes the damage caused to the office by the investigation of historic cases".

That is not the problem. The problem is that the malpractice in the ombudsman's office will affect everything in that office. Frankly, the shifting of historical cases to somewhere else without dealing with the problem of malpractice will shift the problem as well.

The time is always right to do what is right, and it is past time for Al Hutchinson to leave. It is the right time for the Minister of Justice to call on him to leave. We have heard from practically everyone else. Listen to the families who have lost all faith in him and to the public. I appeal to the Minister: for once, do not take the advice of your officials, many of whom slipped seamlessly across from the Northern Ireland Office. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Mr Weir: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after 'Ombudsman' and insert:

"; notes the damage caused to the office by the investigation of historic cases; and calls upon the Minister of Justice to permanently suspend any

new historic investigations by the Office of the Police Ombudsman and bring forward proposals to create public and police confidence in the ombudsman's office, including independent oversight."

The three aspects to the debate are the original motion, our proposed amendment and the SDLP's proposed amendment. On the basis that it is difficult to deny that there have been problems in the ombudsman's office, we do not have a major problem with the wording of the original motion. Indeed, when I and other members of the Committee for Justice had the opportunity to hear from representatives of Criminal Justice Inspection, we found that we could live with the broad thrust of their recommendations. So, in that sense, there is no doubt that there is valid criticism of the ombudsman's office. Our concern is that, in providing solutions to the problems, the motion does not go far enough.

Although valid concerns have been expressed about the ombudsman's office, there are two key distinctions to be drawn. There has been some revisionist history that says that all the problems of public confidence in the ombudsman's office emanated from Al Hutchinson's time. I placed on record at the time that many of us did not have full confidence in the ombudsman's office, even during the days of the blessed Baroness O'Loan.

Mr G Kelly: I do not think that the argument is that the ombudsman's office was always perfect. However, the Member will recall that although a review took place in Nuala O'Loan's time and a number of recommendations were brought forward, Al Hutchinson did not implement those recommendations.

Mr Weir: The Member may or may not have read the transcript of the Justice Committee meeting, which highlighted the fact that the previous investigations of the ombudsman's office concentrated purely on current and ongoing cases rather than historical cases. Indeed, it became abundantly clear that, when Michael Maguire gave evidence to the Committee on behalf of the CJI, the problem was purely on the historical cases side. He did not have any problems with the 80% of current cases. There was no like-for-like comparison to be made. Indeed, when it was put to Dr Maguire by members of the Committee that if, on his way home from the Committee, an

incident happened to him about which he felt that he had to make a complaint against the police, would he have full confidence that such a complaint, as a current issue, would be dealt with perfectly well, he indicated that he would. There are endemic issues in the ombudsman's office that go beyond the individual or just a widespread attack on the office.

Historical cases are at the heart of the matter. The Police Ombudsman himself, who agreed that looking at historical cases had put a certain amount of poison in the system, showed that that is undoubtedly the case. Our amendment deals with three aspects. There are concerns about the way in which the ombudsman's office operates. Concerns have been expressed by, for example, the Northern Ireland Retired Police Officers' Association, that in many ways the office is still a law unto itself. It does not have sufficient independent oversight. If, as part of this process or of any implementation of recommendations, there is an overhaul of the ombudsman's office, there must be some way in which the office is held accountable.

There are two main reasons behind the thrust of our amendment. There is a poison in the system. If we detach the historical cases from the ombudsman's office, there is an opportunity for confidence to be much more readily restored to the office. Dealing with the past is the poison that is at the heart of the matter. We accept that, because of European rulings, there has to be some level of investigation of the past.

However, the other aspect, which we find profoundly disturbing, is the double standards from the party opposite in particular. At times, that party will say that we should draw a line under the past. Indeed, the events of the past few days have shown that the Member for Mid Ulster who is bidding for high office in the Republic of Ireland wants to concentrate on the past few years of his activities and not look further into the past.

Some of the Members opposite propagated a similar attitude when in 1998, for example, they were strongly in favour of opening up the jails and letting out those who had committed crimes. However, when it comes to the mistakes that the RUC made in the past in carrying out its work, a very different attitude prevails. In those cases, the RUC is to be nailed to the mast and every action is to be scrutinised. The point that we are making is that, if we are going

to have investigations into events in the past, they cannot simply be one-sided or focused on one aspect. We cannot have a situation in which the police are persecuted for everything that they did or did not do during the Troubles, while others disappear in the hazy mist of the past.

The problem with the present structures is that, on the one hand, there is an ongoing investigation at the ombudsman's office while, on the other, there is no justice for those who have suffered at the hands of terrorism. We accept that, as a result of the European ruling, there needs to be some level of investigation into the past, but let us at least do it on a fair and equitable basis. Consequently, it is our belief that the ombudsman's office is not the right repository for that type of behaviour.

3.45 pm

I suspect that the real gripe across the Chamber with the current Police Ombudsman is not to do with the flaws in the office, which go beyond an individual, but with a concern that the reports produced by the office have not been written in the way in which some Members opposite would have us believe that they should have been. As they would see it, they have not got the right responses to the questions they asked. They have not got the reports that they wanted, which would point the finger at the securocrats of the army and the RUC. I believe that, ultimately, that is the real gripe that some people have with Al Hutchinson.

I turn briefly to the SDLP amendment, which we reject for a number of reasons. First, it is simplistic to pin the blame on one individual. *[Interruption.]*

I see the honourable Member for South Belfast gesticulating. I am not sure whether it is an amendment or an audition. In the SDLP's 'The X Factor' to see who gets the leadership, today's entrant is obviously Mr McDevitt.

Mr A Maginness: I have no interest in it.

Mr Weir: I appreciate that. The honourable Member for North Belfast is one of the few people not running for the SDLP leadership or deputy leadership. I look forward to his remarks.

To single out an individual is to get it wrong. From the SDLP's point of view, the biggest crime of the current incumbent of the ombudsman's office is not being Nuala O'Loan, and that strikes at the heart of the SDLP

If we are to move forward in the ombudsman's office, creating a further vacuum at the top will not help. The ombudsman has indicated that, following a timely process, he will depart in June next year, which will allow for a proper recruitment process to find somebody suitable for the post. I am not sure why anybody in their right mind would want to be the Police Ombudsman, but, in a general sense, this will at least allow for the opportunity.

It has been said that another issue is the dysfunctionality at the top of the system, yet, as has been indicated, the ombudsman's office is clearly not the only body of that nature to face such problems. There have clearly been personality clashes between senior figures in the ombudsman's office, resulting in the departure of the chief executive and the chief investigating officer. Indeed, when faced with direct questions at the Justice Committee, the people who filled those posts indicated that they envisaged the ombudsman carrying on. If you are to have continuity or any confidence in the office, to have a situation in which everybody at a high level has been removed would be simply irresponsible.

The SDLP amendment is a form of witch-hunt. It makes a scapegoat of an individual, and it does not deal with the flawed process, which is the one-sided nature of dealing with the past encapsulated in the ombudsman's office and, indeed, the inherent belief that the only people who need to be investigated and held up to scrutiny for the historic situation in Northern Ireland is the RUC. That is simply not sustainable. Consequently, we will support the DUP amendment and oppose that of Mr McDevitt and his colleagues. Like Gary Barlow, I am waiting to see the audition tape from Mr McDevitt in the next few seconds.

Mr McDevitt: I beg to move amendment No. 2:
At end insert:

“; and further calls on the current Police Ombudsman to resign with immediate effect.”

I apologise to the House for my hoarseness, which is the inevitable consequence of a fantastic Saturday morning and a splendid Sunday afternoon celebrating the triumph of the underdog in Irish sports.

Mr Weir: Do you mean Rangers?

Mr McDevitt: Rangers? Although Mr Barlow is not present in the Chamber, in a previous life, before going on to hang out with Robbie Williams and the men of Take That, he may have taken an interest in the law. If he had, as I know that Mr Weir did as a once learned gentleman, he would understand that the gentleman who holds the office of Police Ombudsman is a corporation sole: he embodies that office. Therefore, the call for the resignation of the individual who holds the office of Police Ombudsman is quite appropriate when the public's confidence in that office has been, in my opinion, properly and fundamentally challenged.

The background to our having a Police Ombudsman is worth acknowledging and formally recording in the Chamber. As colleagues will know, the office was created before the Patten recommendations, but it is an integral part of the architecture of a new beginning to policing. Having an independent office headed by a corporation sole to act as arbiter and adjudicator on issues of contention in the today was an important part of breaking with an unhappy and contested past in policing. In the SDLP's view, it is regrettable that the office is also practically the only vehicle through which issues to do with the past can be properly investigated. In fact, it is not just regrettable. If we are honest with ourselves, it is a shameful failure of the House that we have left it to others to carry the burden of the legacy and discovery of some of the terrible deeds in our past. That is something that you, Mr Speaker, will recall that I have commented on previously.

Mr Weir makes an interesting point. As I hear it, it is basically that if we cannot do everything right about the past, do nothing. That is not a solution either; it does not fix anything. When we debate the Office of the Police Ombudsman and the person who embodies that office, we are also, if we are honest about it, acknowledging our failure as an Executive and Assembly. However, is our failure made any better by ignoring the failures that may take place in the Office of the Police Ombudsman? It certainly is not. Are the lives of many thousands of people who were victims of agents of the state or who have issues with how the state conducted itself during the Troubles made any better by choosing to do nothing, just because we cannot do everything? Of course they are not. That is why it is so important that we have a proper and informed debate about how

important the Police Ombudsman's office is and how important it is to have someone of standing in the post, with objective independence at the office's heart and helm.

Colleagues have referred to the previous Police Ombudsman, Dame Nuala O'Loan. She was someone who, in my opinion and, I think, in the opinion of many inside and outside the House, objectified that type of independence. She was someone who was not afraid to annoy everyone.

Mr Spratt: I hear what the Member says about the former ombudsman being objective. That does not surprise me, coming from his party. That was certainly not the view of the police staff associations and others that failed to co-operate with her because of her very clear lack of independence in the investigations of complaints against the Police Service.

Mr McDevitt: I acknowledge Mr Spratt's opinion. Indeed, I respect it. Mr Spratt has a declaration of interest to make in that regard, which we must acknowledge and respect. It is important that we understand that, in being objective, one will invariably find oneself on the wrong side of many people's subjectivity. It is just not possible to be properly and truly independent without seriously ruffling the opinions of the state and those of individuals who may have a vested or passing interest in your work. Mr Hutchinson has done something different: he has fettered his objectivity. That is not my opinion but the informed opinion of several reports. It is not that we are debating the motion in the context of just a single report on the conduct of the Police Ombudsman but that we are debating it in the context of three: one by Mr McCusker, another by Criminal Justice Inspection and a separate report by the Committee on the Administration of Justice. All conclude, in different ways, that there are fundamental issues with the ombudsman's ability to maintain public confidence in his office.

Indeed, an editorial in a local paper on 17 June put it succinctly, and it may be worth reading a little of that to try to sum up some of the arguments. It noted:

"When someone is held in such high regard it is always difficult for their successor to put their own stamp on a job."

That was a reference to Ms O'Loan and the new ombudsman. It continued:

"It would have been unfair to expect Al Hutchinson to be as forthright as Baroness O'Loan. They are clearly different personalities and entitled to adopt different approaches to the role. However, it is fair to expect that whoever is in the office is fiercely protective of its independence."

That is the fundamental issue at the heart of the debate: the ability of an individual who is a corporation sole to defend fiercely, robustly and absolutely his or her independence. The confidence issues that we have are not to do with his character as a gentleman. Indeed, individuals on all Benches will find him to be a warm and friendly gentleman. The issues relate to his ability to defend fiercely his independence.

Another important point of policy and principle on which we need to reflect is the relationship between the Police Ombudsman's office and article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Under article 2, complaints against the police relate to violations of the right to life. Article 2 upholds the police's duty to uphold the right to life. The British Government take the view, and it has never been contested, that the person and body responsible for upholding article 2 obligations to the PSNI and, previously, the RUC is the Police Ombudsman. However, the Police Ombudsman himself contests that duty. He argues that he is not responsible and that article 2 is someone else's business. We trawled the statute book and asked the experts, who can point to no body in this jurisdiction other than his that has a duty to uphold article 2. How can we have confidence in an individual who will not uphold a fundamental article on which his office is built?

I do not wish to take the argument very much further except to say that our amendment contains a simple proposition: stand by the independence of that which we created to create confidence in our policing, and you stand by the future of this state. Allow that to be fettered, interfered with or compromised, and you compromise the potential of this state to be reborn.

Mr B McCrea: I declare an interest as a previous chair of the human rights and professional standards committee of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. In that capacity, I had the opportunity to discuss many issues with the ombudsman and his office, and it is a bit regrettable that, such is the way that we do business here, I have but five minutes to impart

my knowledge, whereas other Members had 10 minutes. Perhaps I should have tabled an amendment. Nevertheless, I will be able to say what has to be said in the time allotted.

The reputation of the office of ombudsman has been completely and utterly trashed by the recent revelations. I stress that it is the office of the ombudsman, not the ombudsman himself.

The attitude, the way that things went on with the chief executive and the senior investigating officer and all the issues that came out cannot do anything other than undermine the public's confidence in the office. The fact that we are discussing this motion in this way means that it is irrevocable. We will not be able to change the people in the ombudsman's office and say to the people of Northern Ireland that we now have confidence in it. It cannot be done. There will have to be a new way of dealing with it.

4.00 pm

For the record, I do not like the way people direct a witch-hunt at an individual who has been found to have done a good job in many aspects of his business. If we collectively have failed because we cannot confront the issues of the past, we should face up to our own responsibilities and not try to push them off on someone whom we asked to do our dirty work for us. We in the Assembly, this political institution, have failed to deal properly with the issues of the past. I do not think that it is possible for any one individual to deal with this. We need to look at it ourselves.

I want to make a point about article 2. It is absolutely right that article 2 defends the right to life. It also says that, in certain circumstances, Governments and police forces have the right to take life, but they must be independently investigated. It does not say that individuals, armed groups, revolutionary conclaves or anybody else has the right to take life. That is the issue: there is no recourse in law for one side.

Mr McDevitt: Does Mr McCrea accept that the British Government's opinion is that it is the job of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland to conduct article 2 investigations in the context of the PSNI?

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

Mr B McCrea: Therein lies the conundrum. The Government may well have said that that was the case then, but they do not say that that is the case in the future. All that the article requires is that somebody independent looks at the issue. We can create any body we like, and we can say that there is a different way of looking at this as long as there is some way of doing it. However, my central tenet is that, on the other side of the equation, there were those who took life and thought that they were fighting a good fight for a cause that they believed in. However, they have not been brought to justice, and that is what is wrong with our society. We have left things unsaid, undone and unfinished.

No matter what way we look at things, when we look at the past, there will always be an issue about whether we can have access to security information and who should ask for access to it. Should it be former police officers or somebody completely new? The real issue is that we still face a threat from dissident republicans and others, and that security information is extremely sensitive. When we look at how we move forward, we should put the past behind us and genuinely accept that we have to find a way forward for the sake of our children and for other generations. That is not what I hear or see. I see people standing for the presidency of Ireland and saying, "Do not judge me as a 22-year-old wearing a beret and carrying a gun, because I have moved on". I may well be one of the few people on this side of the House who might be prepared to listen. However, you cannot have inquiry after inquiry to pick off the scabs of the past and to try to do people down. If you really want to find peace and move forward, you have to find a way to do it together. I reject the amendment and the original motion, and I am still thinking about the DUP amendment.

Mr Dickson: I will, hopefully, not raise my voice but will try to bring some reason to the debate. I am certainly not standing for the leadership of either the Ulster Unionist Party or the SDLP — or the Alliance Party.

I welcome the debate. It is an important part of the process of restoring confidence in the Office of the Police Ombudsman, and I think that that is what the community desperately wants the Assembly to do. I support the unamended motion because it gives us the opportunity to think seriously and hard about the series of events, particularly given the Minister's

acceptance of the recommendation in Dr Maguire's report and his commitment to support the Office of the Police Ombudsman through the work that needs to be undertaken to put things right. That is particularly difficult for an organisation that is what Mr McDevitt described as a sole corporate body. Perhaps that is another area that needs further investigation.

Our united and primary objective, as an Assembly, must be the securing of public confidence in the arrangements for the oversight of policing. A stable, effective and independent Police Ombudsman's office is critical to securing that confidence. Indeed, like other Members, I welcome the fact that reports have shown high community satisfaction in respect of the investigations conducted by the ombudsman into recent events involving the PSNI. I do not think that there has been much dispute about the outcome of those reports.

Clearly, however, we are faced with a difficult situation, and there is a need to address the governance issues raised in the McCusker report, which refers to serious internal divisions in that office. The chief executive has left the ombudsman's office, the senior director of investigations is on long-term absence, and both posts are being filled on an acting-up basis. Serious concerns were raised about the handling of historical cases in the CJINI report. Furthermore, we are faced with the reality that the process for appointing a new ombudsman will take a long time, and that is not in the hands of the Minister of Justice.

Given all those difficulties, the immediate departure of the ombudsman, as proposed by the SDLP, may satisfy its short-term demands for action but, in reality, will not solve the problem. The SDLP's approach to this is, perhaps, short-term; however, I do not believe that it would benefit the office of the ombudsman in the medium or longer term. The absence of an ombudsman from an office in which the two most senior staff beneath are acting up would not allow that office to operate properly. Those are the serious things that we need to take into account. The situation would be even more difficult, given the good work that is, as I said, being done in investigating current cases and the difficult task of bringing about the necessary processes to restore confidence in that office.

I am opposed to the DUP amendment because it would be unsatisfactory to suspend the

investigation of historical cases indefinitely. In fact, we should look at the language used in the amendment proposed by the DUP. Somebody will need to explain to me how you "permanently suspend" something. Suspension implies something temporary; permanent is something very different. The use of the two words in the one sentence is a bit of a problem.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member acknowledge that the legislation relating to the Police Ombudsman was deliberately amended to bring about the investigation of historical cases and that introducing any change, such as that in the DUP amendment, would require primary legislation?

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

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I thank Mr Maginness, whose point I entirely accept. Until this community can find some other means and mechanism of investigating historical cases, until we can address those issues, this community expects that the ombudsman's office will fulfil that role to the best of its ability. Therefore, I oppose the DUP amendment because Dr Maguire's report recommended suspension not termination of those investigations. He said that the approach was to, "stop, fix...and...move forward".

We have a duty and a responsibility to those who have spent years campaigning for answers to provide them with those answers. Frankly, it is reckless to call for the cessation of historical investigations without political agreement on an alternative. That would lead to a long and endless delay and further pain and heartache for those who have lost family and friends. Nor do I agree with the creation of an oversight mechanism for the ombudsman's office. That would lead us into what could be described as a spiral of accountability where, as I said in Committee, we are in danger of an ombudsman for an ombudsman for an ombudsman.

This is a particularly dangerous situation for Northern Ireland, given our failure to deal with the past and the resulting context wherein there will always be disagreement about the outcome of investigations.

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

Mr Dickson: Given all the steps that have been taken and taking all things into consideration —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Dickson: I believe that the path we are on is the one we need to take, and that is to support the motion as it stands.

Mr S Anderson: I will speak to amendment No 1, which was tabled by my party. There is a problem in the ombudsman's office — that is stating the obvious. However, the key issue is not personalities but the very nature and remit of that office. That is where the nub of the problem lies. Our amendment is a genuine effort to address that problem.

Although the office was set up in 1998 to provide scrutiny and accountability in the whole area of policing, it has, for a variety of reasons, wandered down a number of other paths. If we are to move forward, the office needs to focus on its key objective. Until it does so, it will continue to face the sort of difficulties it now finds itself in.

As I look at the substantive motion and the SDLP's amendment, I question the motives behind them. Are those who proposed them genuinely interested in making real progress on the back of the McCusker report and the Criminal Justice Inspection report? I very much doubt it. The Sinn Féin motion is more significant for what it does not say than for what it does say. However, it is clear from previous public statements by Sinn Féin and from what we have heard today in the Chamber from Gerry Kelly that it wants the same outcome as the SDLP does with its amendment: they want Al Hutchinson out. The calls for Mr Hutchinson to go are mischievous and misplaced. They say more about those who make them than they do about the ombudsman. I find it ironic that when Al Hutchinson was Oversight Commissioner during the Patten reforms that brought about the key nationalist demand for the disbandment of the RUC he was seen by those opposite as a great man. Now, they cannot wait to get rid of him.

What role do nationalists see for the ombudsman's office? Are they only interested in using the office to pursue their deep-seated vendetta against former police and other security personnel? Since its inception, the ombudsman's office has not functioned properly. The first ombudsman, Nuala O'Loan, hardly

covered herself in glory. In her determination to extend her powers of investigation she lost the confidence of the unionist community and the police. Al Hutchinson inherited her legacy and, I believe, is being used as a scapegoat to mask fundamental failings not of his own making.

We welcome the Criminal Justice Inspection report, but, as outlined in our amendment, we feel strongly that the chief cause of the current problems in the ombudsman's role is the investigation of historical cases. That ought never to have been part of the remit of the office. In his 2007-08 report, the ombudsman said:

"In taking stock of the pressures in the Office, I came to realise quickly that our staff were coping with immense pressure in maintaining and focusing resources on the current and immediate work of the police complaints system while at the same time responding to the very complex complaints rooted in the conflict and atrocities from 'The Troubles'."

He also warned that the quality of work was beginning to suffer. More recently — just a week or two ago — he told the Justice Committee:

"the Office of the Police Ombudsman was not set up to be a proxy for resolving the wider unresolved legacy issues, yet it finds itself cast in that role and driven in that direction by a lack of an agreed resolution on how to deal with the past."

That is what we need to tackle. Unless the Historical Enquiries team (HET) issue is resolved satisfactorily, Mr Hutchinson's departure will not make any difference. The problems will not simply disappear with him.

It is vital that the Justice Minister urgently bring forward proposals to tackle the key issues. The ombudsman must be able to get on with the job of dealing with current complaints about the police without interference from anyone. Until that happens, it will be very difficult to achieve widespread public and police confidence in that office. I support my party's amendment.

4.15 pm

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion and the SDLP amendment, not the DUP amendment. I do not think that anyone, even in the Chamber, can dispute the view that the Office of the Police Ombudsman is in disarray. There are causes and consequences of the scandal. At the heart of my concern are the people whom that

office was intended to serve. Many of them are watching the debate and listening to Members. Their sense of outrage at what has been done to the Office of the Police Ombudsman is one that my party and I share. The office was set up to serve the public, but it has been totally compromised by those who are paid from the public purse.

The Criminal Justice Inspection report was one of three damning reports that were critical of the Police Ombudsman's office. It said that reports had been changed, that there was no agreement between senior members of staff and that the lowering of independence and the effectiveness of the office were affected. Those are serious issues that should concern the Assembly.

It is an affront to the institutions that we represent that Al Hutchinson remains in office. The fact that he continues to be paid and to hold an office that he has brought into such disrepute is an insult. The Police Ombudsman's conduct is in marked contrast to the dignity and restraint of the families who have asked for his help. I am talking about families with whom I have worked in the past, such as the families from Loughinisland, whose loved ones were killed in the bar in Loughinisland, and of young Damien Walsh from west Belfast. I have had meetings in the ombudsman's office. Those families were never consulted about the time it would take for reports to be completed. They were not consulted or brought up to date as the issue was being investigated.

During the debate, a lot of effort has been invested in blaming past and historical cases. You also have to look at some of the more recent cases in the ombudsman's office that the report criticised. Criticism of the ombudsman lies not only in historical cases but in newer cases that he had been asked to investigate and which his office had been investigating. I want to touch on that point: there are only very limited circumstances in which the Police Ombudsman's office can invoke its special powers of investigation; they have to be "grave and exceptional". It is not the fault of the victims of the past, as some Members are saying, or of the families who went to the ombudsman for help. I do not think that Members should blame those people or those families.

The ombudsman has never been asked to investigate every killing in the conflict. We

should make that very clear. The claim that the past is to blame for the present problems of that office is arrant nonsense; it is the nonsense that is peddled when we look at the past in any constructive way.

Al Hutchinson went into that office with his eyes wide open. He knew exactly what was expected of him. He publicly declared his objection to the responsibility for exercising special powers for incidents that had occurred more than 12 months earlier. The problems that have come to afflict those investigations during his term of office have become a self-fulfilling prophecy. He wanted to get the so-called historical investigations stopped, and now they have been suspended.

There will be efforts by some to ensure that the Office of the Police Ombudsman is never properly resourced or empowered to fulfil the duty that it has in the future, but our party will work to save the Office of the Police Ombudsman. It is not perfect; nothing is perfect. However, we are in a new era of policing, and people are looking for accountability. They are looking to see that mechanisms as important as the Police Ombudsman's office are fair and independent and that it has the confidence of communities. It needs to have that, and the only way in which confidence will be restored is if Al Hutchinson goes.

Mr Craig: I find myself at odds, because we find ourselves in agreement with some of the sentiments of the original motion: we should ensure that confidence is restored in the ombudsman's office and that the independence of that office is ensured. However, I hear a lot of talk from the other side of the House about how that confidence and independence seem now to be lost. That is very strange, because, on this side of the House, there was never any confidence in the office of the ombudsman, and there certainly was very little assurance of the independence of that office under the present ombudsman's predecessor.

The simple truth — I think that we all know it on this side of the House — is that this body was set up under the Labour Government in 1998 to bash, demonise and criticise the lawful forces of law enforcement in Northern Ireland. It was set up to destroy the reputation of the former RUC, and it has done critical damage to that organisation in many respects. What do we see being done with regard to those who

perpetrated violence against that organisation over 30 years? Little or nothing. I hear Members opposite talk about the falsehood of how we have asked for other things to be investigated. The ombudsman's office and the HET have been asked to investigate a series of atrocities down through the years of the Troubles. As yet, we have seen little or no result from those investigations. Why is it that only the RUC is held to account? Why is it that the men in hoods are let off scot-free by this organisation?

Mr T Clarke: And women.

Mr Craig: And women. That is part of the issue. It was good to see in the report on the ombudsman's office that there was criticism of how the HET inquiry system works.

Others talked about our failure as a society to deal with the past. I agree: we have failed to deal with the past. There is certainly a past in my family that has never been dealt with by the system. I have never seen justice for my family members who were murdered while part of the security forces, but I have a sneaking suspicion that the perpetrators of that violence may not be that far away. Is that why there is total silence on the issue?

Mr Campbell: The Member is drawing out the problems of the HET and dealing with the past. Does he agree that part of the bigger problem that we face in Northern Ireland is that some people want a partial examination of the past? They do not want to look at what they did in the past or at the violence, murder and slaughter that they engaged in. They want to engage in a partial examination of what the security forces did by way of response to what they did. Some of them even refuse to co-operate with the HET with regard to the murder of Joanne Mathers and other murders and will not reveal their part in those.

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

Mr Craig: Unsurprisingly, I find myself in total agreement with that. That is part of the bigger problem that we have in Northern Ireland — those with a past who do not wish that past to be examined in any way, shape or form. It is wrong that we investigate only what the lawful security forces of this country did. That is part of the reason that I fully support our amendment to suspend that aspect of the HET investigations and to find an alternative. Other

Members talked about resources — there are resource implications in all this — but, more importantly, there is a huge issue of justice. I certainly see no justice for my family.

Mr T Clarke: I thank the Member for giving way. I appreciate that he referred to the cost of this matter. However, another element that begins with the letter "c" is co-operation. There are Members on the Benches opposite who do not want to co-operate. If we had co-operation from all sides, everyone could seek justice.

Mr Craig: That is absolutely true.

The one thing that I do not like in all this is the hypocrisy. I have heard attack, attack and attack again on Al Hutchinson. Why is he being attacked? He is being attacked because he produced a report that did not agree with the version of history that one side of the House prefers. Was the report wrong, right or indifferent? Let me tell you something: the report was accurate. So, if it is accurate but does not suit your view of history, the man has to go. We all know that that is a witch-hunt.

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

Mr Craig: I pay tribute to Al Hutchinson for having the bottle to stand up and say what is correct.

Mr McCallister: I listened to the debate, and there are several things that it is important to put right. In her contribution, Jennifer McCann suggested that people are blaming victims. I have not heard anyone blame any victim. We believe and other parties collectively believe that something should be put in place that reflects the hurt that has been caused to victims in all this. The failure of the Executive and Assembly to properly address and deal with the past is probably why we are having this debate.

The report rightly said that there was no problem with the new cases that the ombudsman had been looking at. That side of the ombudsman's work has been progressing well and without contention, and that is to be welcomed and acknowledged. In the office of the ombudsman, the failure has been in dealing with the past, yet we keep adding to its workload and looking for someone to handle it. The Assembly has not got to grips with how to deal with the past. The Assembly has not tackled how we deal with

victims or help them, and it has not dealt with any of the issues that come out of the past. It has not tackled how we should face those who want to rewrite some of that history, who want reports to reflect their version of the past and who are unhappy when they do not do so.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Is it not the case that one of the problems that we face is that the former deputy First Minister said when he attended the Saville inquiry, for example, that he could not tell the truth because there was something called a code of honour in the very organisation that had slaughtered our people for 40 years?

Mr McCallister: It now appears that, by that stage, he had perhaps even left the organisation; we are not sure. Of course, he is now off to seek employment in other parts.

That is one of the issues: how do we get that information from groups? The problem in dealing with our past has been that it has been so one-sided. We have to find a way of addressing it, and that has to be a cornerstone of any cohesion, sharing and intergration (CSI) strategy or anything that is produced in that regard.

I will be interested to hear whether the Minister has any suggestions for how we can address historical cases. How are we to deal with them? How are we to address them and fix this problem? That is where all the issues in the ombudsman's office have arisen. They are not related to its workload. The office was not designed to deal with those, but it has had to deal with them, struggle on and then face criticism.

We hear from some parties that that office should be, of course, fiercely independent, yet we are standing here today criticising it and demanding that the head of that office resigns. That is not helpful to the debate. That is why we have to reject that amendment.

4.30 pm

I will be interested to hear from the Minister. We are minded to support the DUP's amendment, but the bit that we are most concerned about is the phrase:

"permanently suspend any new historic investigations by the Office".

We would like to hear the Minister explain how he would deal with or progress that.

Mr McDevitt: I thank Mr McCallister for letting me intervene. I am curious, because Mr McCallister says that it is improper to question whether an office that was established to be independent is, in fact, being independent. It is not just the opinion of some in this House that the ombudsman has failed in his duty to be so; it is the opinion of three separate, outside, independent bodies. If this House is not the place to debate and form judgements on the basis of advice from experts, where is?

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

Mr McCallister: That will be three added minutes. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The point that I was making was that Mr McDevitt said that the office should be fiercely independent, and here we are, debating it today and calling for the head of that office to resign. That is what the SDLP amendment calls for. That is a conflict: they want, because the report did not suit some of their needs, some sort of rewrite.

We have made it quite clear that the problem in the office is with the historical cases side. Yet you are giving that office something to do that it was not created for. You are giving it that work because there is no way of dealing with it. The Assembly has collectively failed to agree on how to deal with the very important historical cases, many of which would help to bring closure to many families who have waited for many years, and not rewrite that history or make any changes. That is what we are saying: it is a failure on the part of this Assembly to deal with the past.

Ms Ritchie: It is important to restore confidence in the Office of the Police Ombudsman, which is an important part of the new policing architecture. I speak to my party's amendment. The Chamber will not need reminding of the hurt and anger that was caused by the Police Ombudsman's report into the Loughinisland atrocity. As a public representative and someone who lives in the community that was directly affected by that massacre, I can say, without equivocation, that confidence in the Police Ombudsman is at an all-time low.

The failure of the Police Ombudsman to reach the conclusion of collusion in relation to the Loughinisland massacre has piled more grief and hurt on to the families of those murdered

and, indeed, on to the community that has lived with that atrocity and its effects and impact.

I remind the Chamber that when we speak of the ombudsman's office and inquiries, we speak of human tragedies; tragedies for those murdered and their families and for the wider community. I want to read a short extract from a letter written on 19 June 1994 in response to the Loughinisland murders:

"What can anyone do — nothing but weep, and send my love and sympathy, as another human being. The people who performed this monstrous act were not acting on my behalf. Before Christmas after the Shankill fish shop and Greysteel I really felt People Power — and the surge of revulsion which united both communities would really prevail in bringing peace. We must carry on working for peace and harmony together".

Only part of what that lady hoped for in 1994 has been realised by us. We have brought about the peace but not the harmony and the uniting of communities that that lady spoke about in the wake of the Loughinisland murders.

Since the beginning of the peace process and the ongoing political process, the SDLP was steadfast in its belief that policing reform should be central. We led on that, took the difficult decisions and were proven right. In light of the recent failings of the Police Ombudsman's office, we are now in a situation where the strengthening of that office is central to the process of uniting our communities by bringing us to a position of reconciliation on the past. On reading the report on the Loughinisland massacre, we find time and again that there is evidence not only that police failed to conduct a proper investigation, but that officers involved appeared to actively usurp it. I simply look to the recommendations from the Police Ombudsman as evidence of that. However, he does not arrive at the most logical conclusion: collusion.

The Police Ombudsman refused to work with Judge Cory's definition of collusion, which includes collusion by omission: the authorities turning a blind eye. Despite the Police Ombudsman's office being governed, as I understand it, by 38 separate pieces of legislation, he has a free hand to decide what definition of collusion will be applied to any inquiry. If we are to deal with the past, if we are to have an equal playing field for all victims, and if we are to have continuity in our approach

to the pursuit of justice for those who have been murdered and their families, I believe and contend that we must have an agreed definition of collusion.

Restoring confidence in the ombudsman's office can be done only by strengthening the office in a manner that will copper-fasten its independence through proper resourcing, staffing and finance in order to expedite all the outstanding inquiries and to bring justice and relief to the families. An agreed definition of collusion, perhaps legislated for, would be a major step in safeguarding future police ombudsmen from the potential of interference and political pressure.

In conclusion, we will not have a united community unless we have confidence that the tragedies and questions that hang over our past are being dealt with in an independent, equal and just manner.

Mr Lunn: Like others, I welcome the debate and hope that it will turn out to be a contribution towards restoring confidence in the office of the ombudsman, which the motion calls for. That confidence has been severely diminished by a sequence of events, which were virtually all to do with the investigation of historical cases, such as the tragedies at McGurk's Bar and Loughinisland and the reports thereon, the resignation of the chief executive, and the allegations made by Mr Pollock that Department of Justice officials had interfered with the governance and functioning of the ombudsman's office. If I have read the report correctly, those allegations were not upheld.

The reports issued by Dr Maguire and Mr McCusker are forthright and demanding in the actions required. Mr McCusker rightly demanded that governance issues be addressed and internal divisions in the ombudsman's office be dealt with. However, given the fact that there is neither a chief executive nor a senior director of investigations in place, would it help or hinder the need to address those problems if Mr Hutchinson were forced from office or feels that it is appropriate to vacate his office immediately? If Sinn Féin is so determined that he should go, and, if I have heard its Members right, go immediately, why did the party not include that in the original motion?

Sinn Féin now seems to be piggybacking on the SDLP's amendment, but we do not agree with it and we cannot support it. That is not to say that we agree that Mr Hutchinson should be allowed

to fulfil his timetable and be allowed to continue until June 2012. If he can be replaced in an orderly fashion and do his job in the meantime, fair enough, but he has issued a strong defence for his position. He has acknowledged the problems caused by the historical investigations, and he has accepted all the recommendations of the Maguire report, which does not actually contain a recommendation or demand for his demise. As many other Members said, it is generally accepted that the office's performance in dealing with current cases — probably the most important ongoing work — is satisfactory. So, given all the circumstances, we do not feel that it is necessary to call for immediate resignation.

The DUP amendment goes further than Dr Maguire's recommendation in calling for the Minister of Justice to "permanently suspend" any new historical investigations by the office. Again, that goes further than recommendations 1 and 2 of the Maguire report. It also asks for another oversight body to oversee what is evidently already an oversight body, which is a point that my colleague Mr Dickson made. That just does not seem necessary. Both demands cause us problems, and we feel that a more measured approach is required. The suspension of historical inquiry activities, except those being pursued jointly with the PSNI pending the full operation of the strategic plan for the historical enquiries directorate, is enough, and another layer of oversight does not seem realistic or necessary. So we will not be supporting the DUP amendment either.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he accept that it is crucial that the public have confidence in the ombudsman's office and in the way in which it works, and that the ombudsman's report into the Omagh bomb inquiry did gain credence, particularly among the victims' families? It is very important that victims feel that an ombudsman's office works in their interest.

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

Mr Lunn: I will not need it, Mr Speaker. The Member makes a fair point. There are different views, as evidenced today across the Chamber, about the validity or honesty of various historical inquiry reports. I prefer to dwell on the present. What is the best thing for the ombudsman to do in the coming months? What is the best thing

for us to do? Is it to demand his resignation or to accept the fact that, given the circumstances, cutting off the head of an organisation that has already lost its two most senior personnel is not really the way to go? I am not making a judgement on Mr Hutchinson's performance. He is the man in post and, as we all know, it is not unknown for leaders to linger for a while as their successor is sorted out.

We support the original motion and look forward to the Minister's comments on what he considers necessary to restore full confidence in the Office of the Police Ombudsman, and his view, if he cares to give it, on the future position of the current incumbent.

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): First, I congratulate Gerry Kelly and his colleagues on securing today's debate on the very important topic of restoring confidence in the Office of the Police Ombudsman. I welcome the terms of the motion, which should gain widespread support, and am grateful for the opportunity to address the issues that have been raised.

As I said when I addressed the Justice Committee on 8 September, I remain firmly of the opinion that the Office of the Police Ombudsman is central to the policing architecture of Northern Ireland and I am committed to ensuring that the office is able to perform its responsibilities in a full and effective manner, capable of securing widespread public confidence. I recognise that, on foot of the recent Criminal Justice Inspection report and Tony McCusker's report to me in June, there is essential work to be done to improve the operation of the Police Ombudsman's office and to ensure that it is capable of securing widespread public confidence. The ombudsman and I have accepted all the recommendations made in Dr Maguire's report. The ombudsman and his senior management team have outlined in their action plan how they propose to address the issues, and progress is already being made on those.

I want and expect a full implementation process that is capable of independent validation so that the ombudsman's office will once again fulfil its functions with the confidence of the public. I also accept that there are areas where I can and should, with my Department, provide support, work co-operatively and deliver the finance needed to build up capacity on historical cases. I support the original motion, as tabled,

subject to one important caveat. That caveat is that there are proper boundaries that I should not go beyond as Minister in ensuring that the right steps are in place in the ombudsman's office.

The ombudsman has an independence of action in respect of the investigation of cases that I am bound to defend. I do not, however, speak to or agree with the proposed amendments from the DUP and the SDLP. With regard to the DUP amendment, although the reputational damage that was caused to the ombudsman's office by the investigation of historical cases is acknowledged, it would be wholly inappropriate to permanently suspend any new historical investigations.

4.45 pm

On 8 September, I emphasised to the Justice Committee that the decision regarding historical cases was a suspension and not a cessation. Our article 2 compliance with the European Court of Human Rights requires us to have a mechanism for the independent investigation of those cases. The Police Ombudsman still has critical responsibilities in that area. In proposing his amendment, Peter Weir talked about different ways to deal with the past. Unless and until a political agreement on a new mechanism is in place, that would be a recipe for unlimited delay. There is no consensus at this stage. Currently, there are no alternatives to the work that is being done. To permanently suspend historical investigations — whatever "permanently suspend" means — would be a direct breach of our article 2 obligations.

I note in passing that the amendment also calls on the Minister to take action to direct the ombudsman's office as to how to carry out those duties. It is not the Minister's role to direct any part of the work of the ombudsman's office. Therefore, on those two grounds, whatever one might think about the sentiments behind the amendment, it is unacceptable as it stands.

I cannot support the SDLP's amendment either. It calls for the current Police Ombudsman to resign with immediate effect. It is incumbent on the Assembly to seek to maintain and support the policing architecture, which has secured widespread public confidence in policing. That includes not only the continued existence of the Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, but the post of ombudsman and the independence and integrity of that

office. No one disputes the regrettable position in which the Office of the Police Ombudsman finds itself at present nor underestimates the difficult period that lies ahead as it seeks to regain public confidence in the adequacy of the processes and the robustness of the conclusions that have been reached by the ombudsman in respect of historical cases.

However, there is a real need to preserve the business continuity of the office so that current complaints — the vast bulk of complaints against the PSNI — continue to be effectively investigated. Dr Michael Maguire made it clear that he would have confidence in reporting any grounds for complaint to the Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland at present.

Of primary importance to me, as I know it will be to the Assembly, is the need for an action plan that is capable of independent validation. That is why I welcome the ombudsman's commitment to seeking independent validation from CJINI that the necessary programme of work has been successfully completed. Al Hutchinson will invite Michael Maguire and his team back once he considers that the recommendations have been implemented. They will, once again, conduct a thorough inspection and provide an honest appraisal of the situation as they find it at that stage.

The ombudsman has properly accepted the chief inspector's recommendation that no historical cases should be commenced or completed until Criminal Justice Inspection has indicated that the recommendations are essentially complete and the way is free to resume. I express that view recognising that it should not be my decision any more than I should decide which cases should be considered first or how long it should take to investigate them. Let us not make the critical mistake of allowing what are proper and serious concerns about the work of the ombudsman's office in respect of historical cases to damage wider confidence in the policing architecture and institutions in which I believe Northern Ireland has every reason to have confidence.

In that respect, I have to disagree with points that were made by Jennifer McCann. All of the evidence shows that the office's current work is being done well. The CJINI report substantiates that. However, I must say that I have been surprised by the efforts of some people to denigrate all aspects of the office's work. We

cannot and should not just take those aspects from reports that we like and ignore the bits that do not fit with the pre-prepared narrative.

Mr A Maskey: I appreciate the Minister's giving way. I will try to be brief. A lot of attention has been directed, rightly, to the past. However, does the Minister not agree that, on a number of relatively recent occasions that are absolutely nothing to do with the conflict, the ombudsman's office has been shabby? Indeed, one such occasion was the subject of a serious report by Sam Pollock himself; the Taylor case in Coleraine, which resulted in a Public Prosecution Service member of staff being suspended for up to four years. That is not conflict-related. It is not the past. It is recent. It is very current. At present, certain families feel aggrieved by the shabby treatment of their complaints against the police by the ombudsman's office. Some of that has been written up in substantial reports by Sam Pollock and has been acknowledged by the current ombudsman, Al Hutchinson.

Mr Ford: I accept the Member's point. The CJINI report highlighted a couple of issues with current cases. However, against the backdrop of something like 3,000 cases every year, the reality is that the vast majority of cases are being dealt with well. If we accept Michael Maguire's critical assessment of how the office conducts and reports its investigation in historical cases, we must also accept his endorsement of the way in which it carries out its investigations into current cases.

Many Members concentrated on the issue of dealing with the past. I think every Member from the Ulster Unionist, SDLP and Alliance parts of the Chamber who spoke mentioned the issue of the past. The absence of a political consensus about the past makes it hard to envisage the early creation of any alternative mechanism to address these cases. The ombudsman is clear that, in the absence of an alternative and all-encompassing approach to the past, contention about the adequacy of the investigation of historical cases will always feature where the outcome does not fit with an existing point of view, and I agree with him.

I restate my view on the need for a discussion on how we tackle the past and in particular on how we avoid focusing on a small number of the most contentious cases becoming a major problem for the overall justice system. I also reiterate my call for a public debate on these

issues and urge the Secretary of State and the First Minister and deputy First Minister to consider how that debate can most effectively be taken forward. That is an issue for all of us. The past simply cannot be left to the Historical Enquiries Team, the ombudsman and the Coroners Service conducting legacy inquests.

Conall McDevitt said that it was a shameful failure of this House in not dealing with the past and John McCallister said that it was a collective failure. In response to John's request for me to say something about my views as to how to deal with the past: this debate is not where we should be discussing the past entirely. However, I believe that the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past produced what should have been a starting position for discussion. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Ford: The fact that certain Members have concerns about the one particular issue, namely the payments, should not damage the other good work done by that group. As I said, this is not an issue for today; it is an issue that requires significant discussion and perhaps should be conducted at a rather more serious level than the one that greeted my reference to Eames/Bradley.

There has been much debate about when Al Hutchinson should resign. Let us be clear and practical: an office with no ombudsman, no permanent chief executive and no senior director of investigations would not be a properly functioning office. That was a point made by the two next most senior officers when they went to the Justice Committee. It does not make sense to operate in that way, and I question those who believe that it does, whatever their misgivings about historical cases.

The process for appointing a new ombudsman is one for the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I wrote to them last week in light of their responsibility for the process and the necessity to proceed with it as soon as possible. I also made it clear in my correspondence to them that the appointment process should not be delayed to allow time to address the wider concerns that exist about the ombudsman's office.

As he made clear to the Justice Committee, the current ombudsman is open to leaving earlier than the date he specified — 1 June

2012 — if a new appointee is ready to take up office before then. That is a practical and common-sense approach, which, frankly, leaves the responsibility where it correctly lies, which is with the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

In conclusion, the existence of an effective and independent complaints system is something that the public and the police have a right to expect. That is a key part of the policing architecture in Northern Ireland and is intended to secure public confidence in the Police Service. It must be our aim to get public confidence in every respect.

The system for current complaints is fully functioning. What we now need is comprehensive action to fix the problem with governance and historical cases. I and my Department will take the steps that we properly can to enable and support that whilst respecting the operational independence of the office. I am clear about the proper limits of intervention. I accept the motion as tabled, but, for the technical reasons that I outlined, I cannot accept either of the amendments.

Mr A Maginness: There is no witch-hunt as far as the SDLP is concerned in relation to Al Hutchinson. We respect him as an individual. However, we believe that he got things very badly wrong. Three reports substantiate that: one by the Committee on the Administration of Justice, one by Mr Tony McCusker and one by the CJI. All were independent, and all indicated difficulties in the office. Indeed, by showing dysfunctionality in that office, the McCusker report prefigured what was contained in the Criminal Justice Inspection's report. That dysfunctionality does not arise from the flaws of individuals in the office; it arises from the Police Ombudsman's lack of leadership when organising, dealing with issues, supervising and making sure that his office had a critical edge. The fact that he did not create a situation in which management was able to cope, work together and develop systems and protocols for dealing with the issues involved — highly critical issues for all of us in the House — is his personal responsibility.

It is with some sadness that I and my party ask for his resignation. We believe that a new leader is needed at the top of the ombudsman's office. If there is no new leadership, and soon, the damage already caused to that office will simply be exacerbated. We want to limit that damage

and rebuild the office. That requires a new leader at the top, and this Police Ombudsman should, therefore, go as quickly as possible.

The ombudsman's office is a bulwark for the PSNI and for policing here in Northern Ireland. We need a good, efficient and effective office, which has the confidence of the community. We do not have that at the moment.

There has been much talk about lopping off or removing historical cases from the purview of the office. That simply cannot be done, because the legislation says that there is an obligation and requirement for that office to investigate those historical cases. That is because, under article 2 obligations of the European Convention, it is necessary for those historical cases to be investigated. That is a legal obligation. Indeed, as the Minister of Justice said so robustly in the House today, you cannot possibly remove historical cases from the ombudsman's office without having an alternative, and, quite simply, no such alternative has been established.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mr A Maginness: Do I get another minute?

Mr Speaker: Yes. *[Laughter.]*

Mr B McCrea: You did not want to hear it just in case it was good.

Surely the Member understands that the matter has been settled and that, for the purposes of investigating issues of the past, the PSNI is not the RUC, so an alternative way could be found. In fact, the HET was also referred to in Government submissions as a body looking after the past. It is not specified who shall do it, only that, under European legislation, there should be another body, and we could set up another such body.

Mr A Maginness: I am grateful for those comments, but I re-emphasise the Minister of Justice's point that there is no alternative. Currently, we have a mechanism whereby the actions of the RUC and, indeed, the actions of the PSNI in relation to article 2 obligations can be thoroughly investigated. There is no alternative, and it would be absurd for the ombudsman's office to be expanded to include people from outside the police.

That is the substance of the argument put forward by unionists, in particular, today. The argument is that, because there is no investigative process in relation to the past, which we as a political party want to see, you throw the baby out with the bath water. In other words, you do not have a mechanism to investigate the RUC and past failings that have been proven by the Police Ombudsman's office.

5.00 pm

We should commit ourselves once again to supporting the Office of the Police Ombudsman. However, the only way to do that —

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

Mr A Maginness: — and remedying this situation is to replace the current Police Ombudsman and replace —

Mr Speaker: Time is up.

Mr A Maginness: — weak leadership with strong leadership that reconstructs the office.

Mr Wells: We have to remember exactly why the Office of the Police Ombudsman was created. Those of us who have been around for a very long time will recall the period when, if you made a complaint against the conduct of an individual RUC officer, that complaint was considered by a more senior RUC officer. Some made the point that that indicated a conflict of interest. One of the recommendations was to establish an independent ombudsman or ombudsperson — whatever you want to call it — that would be totally detached from the RUC or the PSNI, as it is now.

I have noticed that throughout all the contributions, even those made by Members who clearly have some agenda against Al Hutchinson, there was very little complaint about his work in carrying out the day-to-day role of investigating individual complaints lodged by members of the public or their representatives. That was the main principle that established the Office of the Police Ombudsman, and Al Hutchinson seems to get a very high mark for that aspect. It is interesting that he has carried out that role without the controversy that surrounded his predecessor. We all remember just how controversial the office was under Nuala O'Loan. It seemed that not a week went by when she was not embroiled in some issue that brought controversy to her door. Al

Hutchinson has got on with that work in a low-key but effective manner, and many of us who have used him have found him to be extremely efficient.

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

The difficulty is that, in the middle of all this, the poisoned chalice of historical inquiries and the past has been foisted on the office. No one in the House would believe for one moment that that is not a terribly difficult issue. The theme has emerged in this debate time and time again. The problem for the Members opposite is that Al Hutchinson and his team have looked into some of those issues and not come up with the reports that they would have liked. It is as simple as that. Rather than suggest for one moment that he may have come up with a balanced argument, they demand his head on a plate. I have great concerns about politicians demanding the head of someone who is meant to be independent from both the police and other institutions. That worries me. It means that every time whoever succeeds Mr Hutchinson does something that Sinn Féin or the SDLP do not like, those parties will immediately rush to demand that he must be removed and “off with his head”. The reality may be that they simply do not agree with what he said.

Mr Weir talked about the selectivity of the demand for inquiries, which was one of the strongest points made in the debate. Let us be honest: there are individuals in the Chamber who have a terrorist past. Indeed, there are individuals who spoke in the debate who have a very difficult and bloody terrorist past. We know whom we are talking about. The proposer of the motion, for instance, has been convicted of it. It is OK to demand an inquiry into the activities of the lawful forces of the PSNI or the RUC. That is fine — they can be held up to ridicule — but woe betide anyone who asks for an inquiry into the activities of MLAs who have a very seedy past; that is not allowed. Equally, in the Loughinisland case, which affects my constituency, it seems to me that it is not a question of Mr Hutchinson's incompetence. It is quite simply a question of not agreeing with the outcome of the report that seems to be the issue. I must say that alarm bells ring in my head about allowing the ombudsman to be held up as a sacrificial lamb because his reports do

not agree with the preconceived prejudices of certain nationalist MLAs.

Let us say that the amendment proposed by the SDLP is made here today, and Mr Hutchinson decided, "Yes, they are absolutely right. I have listened to the pearls of wisdom and Conall McDevitt's leadership speech. It was wonderful, and I will support what he said and resign in the morning." Where does that leave us? The Justice Minister put it absolutely correctly, and so did Mr Lunn. It leaves us without a Police Ombudsman and without several senior officers. That is a recipe for chaos. Even party leaders, when they resign, give at least several months' notice so that their position can be replaced.

Mr Weir: Does the Member agree with me that the situation as highlighted there just shows the sheer folly of the position of the SDLP on the issue?

Mr Wells: Absolutely. On Thursday, Mr McDevitt sat all day at the Policing Board appointing a senior police officer. That is an important task. He knows how long it took to advertise that position, to trawl through those who applied and to go through the interview procedure. You simply cannot replace a high-powered position such as that overnight. The SDLP is saying that we should leave the Police Ombudsman's office completely headless for the next eight or nine months while that is going on. That is no way for an individual who has a concern about the activity of the police or the conduct of an individual police officer to go forward. That is no way to leave that organisation.

Al Hutchinson, under considerable pressure, has agreed to step aside in June 2012. That is the honourable thing to do. He has given sufficient time for his replacement to be appointed. I do not think that we, as an Assembly, have the right to demand that he goes and when he goes. We need to give him and the office the time to have a smooth transition to a new ombudsman. That is the best way forward for all the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt do achan duine a labhair inniu. I want to begin by reminding Members of the rationale of the motion that we put forward after examination of the Criminal Justice Inspection's report into the Police Ombudsman's office, particularly around independence and the public confidence in that office. Core to that is

the statutory requirement that the office has to be independent for it to comply with article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The CJI report — this has perhaps been missed by a lot of the people who spoke this afternoon — came about because the ombudsman asked for it. It was not Sinn Féin, the SDLP or any other political party; it was the ombudsman himself. The reason it came about — the ombudsman himself accepts this — is that the chief executive brought the inner workings of his office into the public domain. Tony McCusker was in front of the Committee and gave a particular insight into the relationships within the office. It was the ombudsman who asked for the report and no one else.

Peter Weir made the observation — I think that other people have made the same observation — that there are people who think that the current ombudsman is not doing a good job, people who think that he is doing a better job, others who think that Nuala O'Loan did that type of job and that someone did a better job, or whatever. The most important thing is that, when you have competing or contrasting views, you establish an independent body, which is then tasked to tell us what it thinks of the workings of the ombudsman's office.

In 2005, the Criminal Justice Inspection did a report into the office of the ombudsman, and it stated that it found an effective, efficient organisation. It also went on to state that it was:

"delivering on its stated aims and objectives with public confidence in the system increasing".

When Michael Maguire was in front of the Committee, he was asked if he could say the same about the ombudsman's office in 2011, and he said that he could not. That is the independent view, which is telling us that the ombudsman's office is not effective and efficient. That is what we —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: No, I am not giving way. You had your chance.

Michael Maguire articulated that to the Committee. He was in no doubt — I have not heard a dissenting view today contradicting him — that the independence of the office was lowered. I have not heard a dissenting voice.

Not one person contradicted Michael Maguire when he said that.

A Member: Are you not giving way?

Mr B McCrea: He will not give way.

Mr McCartney: It is not a matter of giving way. You had your opportunity.

Bear in mind that, when he was asked about the state of his office, the Police Ombudsman told the Committee that it was unprecedented in his 44 years in public office. It is not just Michael Maguire, Sinn Féin or anyone else saying it. The Police Ombudsman himself said that the flaws in his office were unprecedented in his 44 years in public office.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: No, I am not giving way.

He went on to say that not only did he accept that but that he was in charge and was the person responsible. We are being asked by Members to accept that a person who tells us that his organisation is inefficient and ineffective — in his opinion, an unprecedented situation — should continue in that office. We have said that he accepts that he is the person responsible and that he was the person at the wheel who drove the machine to where it is. We all accepted — there were no dissenting voices — that the organisation's level of independence has been lowered. When the Minister appeared before the Committee, Stewart Dickson made the point that, in any other public authority, the incumbent would be asked to go. He was right when he said that.

Other Members have itemised some particular cases. However, this is not about individual reports but about the office as a whole. The Minister must have that in mind when he takes the matter forward to restore public confidence. There was a clash of views. Michael Maguire stated very clearly that reports were altered to lessen criticism of the police, but Al Hutchinson denied that that was the case. There was a conflict, which was to do with the fact that the independent voice must be listened to. When Michael Maguire was asked to continue, he said that the status quo was no longer acceptable. In fairness to him, when he was asked whether that meant that the status quo could take us forward, he said that he was not in a position to say that. However, I think that we all arrived at the same conclusion.

The Minister said today that we have to accept Michael Maguire's assertion that he is fine about the non-historical cases. Some Members on the other Benches made the case that Michael Maguire did say that he would go to the Police Ombudsman with an ordinary complaint. However, Dr Maguire also said that the status quo could not take us forward. That is the most important point in this debate.

I want to deal with a couple of things that Members said. Basil McCrea said very clearly that when it comes to public confidence, the Police Ombudsman's office is "completely and utterly trashed". We have to ask who is responsible for that. I heard Members say today that we cannot call for a person who holds public office to resign. That is incomprehensible. If the person is accountable, he or she can be asked to resign. We were told that we cannot ask people to resign in case there is no one to replace them. If someone makes a hames of a job, we cannot call on that person to resign because he or she can say that no replacement is available. That amounts to a very short-sighted public office.

Stewart Dickson and Trevor Lunn made an important point about the way forward. To me, the way forward is not what the Minister outlined today; rather, it is a very simple explanation. The incumbent Police Ombudsman has accepted that he is the person responsible for the mess. It was the Police Ombudsman himself — not me — who said that the situation had come into the public domain only because the chief executive resigned. It is important that we acknowledge that.

Jonathan Craig asked why this debate was taking place today and why we were challenging the Police Ombudsman's view. We are challenging it because he asked for it, in the shape of the report. The Ombudsman invited the CJI to produce a report, the findings of which are damning. In my opinion, the Police Ombudsman's position is totally and absolutely untenable. John McCallister talked about people rewriting history. We can all say, do and feel what we like about that particular statement, but in this instance it is very topical. Reports were rewritten, and Michael Maguire made it very clear in his report that reports were altered to lessen criticism of the police. He stated that in full view of the Committee, and I did not hear anyone challenge him. In fact, he verified it on a number of occasions. Every member of the Committee was present. It is very important to

make the point that, to have confidence in the independence of the ombudsman's office, we cannot allow a situation to arise in which people rewrite reports willy-nilly.

5.15 pm

The clinching point, to which the Minister needs to provide an answer, is that two senior members of the ombudsman's team went to him and said that they wanted to distance themselves from the report.

Mr Spratt: Were they independent?

Mr McCartney: It is not a matter of whether they were independent. They went to the ombudsman and told him that they wanted to distance themselves from the report, and the ombudsman conceded. Therefore, two people set out to carry out an investigation, their findings went to the senior team in the ombudsman's office, and the report that was sent out had a different complexion. They then went back and said that they would not stand over it, and the ombudsman accepted that. Why would anybody accept a piece of work, alter it, and then, when two senior people go back to him, say, "OK, you were not part of that."? We put that to Michael Maguire, who has long years of service in holding public officials to account. We asked him whether he had seen or experienced anything like that before in his life, and he said no. Two senior members of his team were there when he was asked what sort of place it would be if they wished to distance themselves from a report being put in front of us, and they all laughed. That laughter told us the state of the ombudsman's office.

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

Mr McCartney: We ask Members to support the motion. We will support the SDLP amendment and reject the DUP amendment. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, Members should note that, if that amendment is made, the Question will still be put on amendment No 2.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 47; Noes 44.

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell,

Mr T Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mrs Lewis, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Craig and Mr McQuillan.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Ms M Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr W Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Gildernew, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr Murphy, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McCartney and Mr McMullan.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 38; Noes 53.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Ms M Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Gildernew, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr Murphy, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Durkan and Mr Eastwood.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas,

Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mrs Lewis, Mr Lunn, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Craig and Mr McQuillan.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question, as amended, put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 47; Noes 44.

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mrs Lewis, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Craig and Mr McQuillan.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Ms M Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr W Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Gildernew, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr Murphy, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McCartney and Mr McMullan.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly welcomes the Criminal Justice Inspection report into the Office of the Police Ombudsman; notes the damage caused to the office by the investigation of historic cases; and calls upon the Minister of Justice to permanently suspend any new historic investigations by the Office of the Police Ombudsman and bring forward proposals to create public and police confidence in the ombudsman's office, including independent oversight.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I appreciate that it is probably not reasonable to ask you to define "permanently suspend" for me, but I wonder whether you could advise me what the constitutional significance is of a resolution of this House instructing a Minister to do something that is ultra vires.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You will know that, as the Deputy Speaker, I cannot give you any direction in that situation. [Laughter.]

Adjourned at 5.55 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 20 September 2011

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Private Members' Business

Programme for Government

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to switch off their mobile phones, because they interfere with the Building's electronic systems.

The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for this debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that good practice in governance is to base a Budget on an up-to-date Programme for Government so that the policy initiatives can inform financial planning; notes that it is now over six months since the Assembly voted on the Executive's Budget 2011-15; further notes the significant economic change in this region since the 2008-2011 Programme for Government was published; and calls on the Executive to publish for consultation a new draft Programme for Government which adequately addresses the economic challenges in the coming years.

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle.

Tá an-áthas orm an rún seo a mholadh. A Cheann Comhairle, nó, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle — tá a lán béil d'fhocail ansin. Dá bhféadfaí focail a ithe, bheadh ábhar lóin ansin, déarfainn.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, there are a lot of words in your title, and I said that, if we could eat our words, there would certainly would be a lunch there for someone.

Bhí mé i láthair inné nuair a d'fhoscail Uachtarán na hÉireann an síneadh nua leis an Chultúrlann ar Bhóthar na bhFál. Chonacthas

domh gur eiseamláir iontach an tionscnamh sin den sochar a thig as airgead poiblí a infheistiú sa phobal agus an tairbhe a thig dá bharr. Ním comhghairdeas le coiste stiúrtha na Cultúrlainne as an éacht atá déanta acu ar son na Gaeilge, ar son na turasóireachta, ar son na healaíona, agus ar son na fostaíochta sa Cheathrú Gaeltachta d'iarthar Bhéal Feirste.

Yesterday, I attended the opening of the extension to the Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich on the Falls Road by the President of Ireland, Mary McAleese. It is an excellent example of how public investment can benefit communities. I congratulate the management committee of An Cultúrlann on what it has done for employment, tourism, the Irish language and the arts in the Gaeltacht Quarter of west Belfast.

Two Departments, the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), contributed to the cocktail of funding that enabled the project. That spend was a result of the previous Programme for Government (PFG), and it illustrates how communities can benefit from well-directed public spending. It also underlines the need for the existing Budget to be based on a revised Programme for Government for 2011-15 and an updated investment strategy that demonstrates how strategic policies drive financial allocations, not the other way around.

We could use many metaphors to demonstrate the role of the Programme for Government in public spending. I suppose that the Programme for Government is the road map that should lead public spending in the direction in which it needs to go to best serve our communities' needs.

The Programme for Government, and the consultation around it, allows for participative democracy and adds to the transparency and openness of government. Those are all positive elements that increase public confidence in

government. We all know that the Northern Ireland Executive have very few levers with which to transform the local economy and set it on a path that will stimulate growth and generate jobs. We are seeking to augment those levers and add a more competitive rate of corporation tax to our economic toolkit, but, as we heard yesterday, that is likely to take some more time.

In the meantime, the main economic lever that the Executive have is public expenditure. We need to use that lever to our best possible advantage, given the deep cuts that we face. Now, more than ever, we need to ensure that we maximise every benefit from public expenditure. The way to do that is through an effective Programme for Government that is flexible enough to respond to changing economic conditions.

Unfortunately, however, the current Executive have no up-to-date policy framework for our public expenditure allocations. It is plain that good practice in governance is to base a Budget on an up-to-date Programme for Government so that policy initiatives can, as I said, inform financial planning. Such a Programme for Government is referred to in the ministerial code, which states that the Executive Committee will agree:

"each year on ... a programme incorporating an agreed budget linked to policies and programmes".

It is more than six months since the House voted on the four-year Budget, and we still do not have a Programme for Government. During the Budget debates earlier this year, the arguments as to why we did not require a new Programme for Government were well rehearsed in the Chamber. Generally speaking, they were framed in the words, "the economy is the priority". However, we need a much more detailed programme than simply one phrase.

During those debates, the constant refrain was that the Executive took the important step of making the economy the top priority and that that will continue. The economy should still be the top priority. However, there has been significant economic change in the region since the 2008-2011 Programme for Government, so there is a need to renew the Programme for Government. In comparison with the summer of 2008, an additional 29,000 people here are now registered as unemployed. The proportion of unemployed 18- to 24-year-olds has risen from 12.1% to 18.3% in the same period.

Significant reductions in our spending have been imposed by the British Government, with total cuts over the next four years representing, in real terms, a decrease of £4 billion compared with the baseline for 2010-11.

As we know, and heard again this morning, fuel prices continue to rocket, and many more people than previously will be faced with fuel poverty. As a result of the coalition's welfare reform plans, we will see a significant negative impact on vulnerable members of society who are in receipt of benefits, and that will have a proportionally greater impact on people in Northern Ireland.

The Finance Minister stated that the Northern Ireland Executive need to decide what their real priorities are, because we can no longer afford to deliver the full range of commitments set out in the Programme for Government. Yet, more than 15 months since the Finance Minister made that statement to the Chief Executives' Forum, we are still without a new Programme for Government.

It is imperative that the Executive publish for full consultation a new draft Programme for Government that does five key things. First, it should tackle the imbalance in the Northern Ireland economy, the under-representation of the private sector, and the fact that existing policies will not provide the momentum required to grow the private sector economy in the long term. Secondly, it should prioritise job creation and build on our strong business sectors such as tourism and agrifood, and take a strategic approach to our capital spend to prioritise the shovel-ready building projects that create most jobs.

Thirdly, we should progress North/South development and save money through new economies of scale, reduce duplication and increase specialisation. With the challenging economic times and a new Government in the South, now is a good time to undertake those projects. Fourthly, I believe in investing in young people's education and development so that society and the economy grow. We must help young people in our schools into training and into work in future growth industries and avoid the prospect of a lost generation. My fifth point relates to the protection of front line services, particularly in health. We should stand up for the most vulnerable by responding adequately

to economic fluctuations, such as increased energy costs, which hurt the most vulnerable.

Those are the broad issues on which we need to focus; my colleagues will expand on them and on others in their contributions. We need to begin forming a Programme for Government, and I hope that today's debate will be the first step in that process. Ba mhaith liom deireadh a chur le mo chuid cainte ag an phointe seo, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Molaim an rún don Tionól. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Elliott (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): First, I thank Mr Bradley and his colleagues for bringing forward the motion. Like other Committees, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is looking for a proper opportunity to scrutinise any Programme for Government proposals that come forward. It is important that they have that opportunity. That is why I would like to have witnessed some more movement on it, as Mr Bradley indicated, long before now because it takes time for Committees to give it proper thought. I appeal to the Chairpersons of the other Committees to co-operate in the process almost as a collective group, as the Executive should be co-operating on the Programme for Government. It is important that we have a collective response to any proposals.

I would like to see — hopefully this will come forward in the Programme for Government — Departments and the Executive being creative in bringing forward new proposals and new thought processes, and, as many people call it, thinking outside the box, because in these very difficult economic times it is vital that we have new initiatives and proposals. From a Committee perspective, we will look for further engagement with the European Union in particular and with the broader international community in general.

We believe that the Barroso report has not moved far enough or quickly enough and that there may have been a wasted opportunity, because things have not progressed the way they should. However, there are obviously still quite a lot of opportunities in the European Union. I know that research and development is one particular area where there are significant opportunities for the Executive to exploit financial returns for Northern Ireland.

10.45 am

I will now speak on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party. I have long called for a Programme for Government for this mandate. Before the Budget was set in March, I indicated that I thought that we were putting the cart before the horse because we were setting a Budget without a Programme for Government. I had hoped that a Programme for Government would be established at that time.

Even at this stage, only a few months into the Budget period, we note that the Budget is being changed already. It was changed just last week when student fees were frozen. The Ulster Unionist Party and I accept the fact that some changes and amendments will be needed throughout the Budget period, but unless the Executive take a collective approach and put proper parameters in place for the Programme for Government, all that we are going to do is to make small changes to the Budget at particular times when required. However, if we can set a proper Programme for Government for which there is collective responsibility and to which a cohesive approach is taken, I think that we will be able to have a much more settled Budget. I think that the two will need to work in hand in hand. That is why I believe that, although it is late to be bringing this forward now, it is better late than never.

I am not sure what the junior Minister will say here today. However, I certainly hope that definitive proposals go forward to Committees and parties in the very near future. I know and accept that parties got a draft document a short time ago, and the Ulster Unionist Party has responded to that. If we are to move forward and have a much better decision-making process over the next four years than we had in the previous four, it is very important that we take a cohesive approach and that some of us are not left out in the cold when such decisions are being made.

Mr Humphrey: The Programme for Government 2008-2011 had five key priorities: to grow the economy; to promote tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being; to protect and enhance the environment; to invest and build our infrastructure; and to deliver high-quality and efficient public services.

The main thrust of that Programme for Government was about focusing on the economy, and I think that that was vital and the

correct thing to do at that time. When debating the issue today, we must put into context the situation that evolved from 2008. There was not one Member of the House who could have predicted in 2007 the catastrophe that was to befall the world's economy with the financial collapse in 2008 and the impact that that had on our United Kingdom. Although I was not a Member then, I, too, could not have predicted that. Confidence was zapped from industry as economies contracted and exports reduced, and the global banking system had a massive detrimental effect on money markets and business confidence. In that context, public spending was massively reduced by the new Tory Government to address the outgoing Government's mismanagement of the United Kingdom's economy.

Of course, many in the House complained about the late agreement of the Budget last winter. However, those who accurately recall the reasons for the delay will know that that was due to parties posturing, Ministers staying away from meetings with the Finance Minister and people using the Budget process as a means of electioneering for the forthcoming elections. That did not serve the people of Northern Ireland, and it did not serve the House and its reputation among the public well.

It is right that the new Executive formed after the election should formulate a new Programme for Government. Ministers have come to the House continually to advise us that work on a new Programme for Government is ongoing. The paper that has been left in the Library for Members' use makes clear the consistent line of questioning from Members and responses from Ministers.

I agree that it would be ideal if we could reach a position of having a Programme for Government sitting alongside a new Budget and a new investment strategy. That would be ideal for the House, the people of Northern Ireland and the economy. However, the House must remember that we have a five-party Executive. When we look across the water to the mainland, we see the tensions that exist in a coalition Government of two parties. It is vital that all Members across the parties in the Assembly act responsibly and, as far as possible, in a collegiate way, just as they did following the recent positive statement on the freeze on tuition fees. That showed a level of collective responsibility and maturity in

the House that many people out there did not believe could happen.

I understand that the Programme for Government will soon go out for consultation. Yet again, we hear the words, "It will go out for consultation". That process will take some 16 to 18 weeks. Surely it is time that we reviewed the process of having such lengthy consultations. It does not provide or deliver good governance. In times of economic hardship and financial constraint, it is important that the Executive and those who provide leadership and confidence in the House act accordingly. Failure to do so will undermine business confidence even further and erode the reputation of this place even more. As last autumn and winter demonstrated, it will create real fear in the community and voluntary sector. At that time, how many Members had people come into their constituency offices concerned about provision of finance and security of employment for staff in that sector? The sector was very concerned about failure to deliver because, owing to posturing in the House, the Assembly could not agree a Budget.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that, in actual fact, some community and voluntary groups are still concerned and still approaching MLAs because they have not received any money for, perhaps, the past eight or nine months, even though the Budget has been set since March? That did not just happen prior to March but continues to happen.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute added to his time.

Mr Humphrey: The Member will realise that the reason that many community and voluntary sector groups suffer those hardships is because the party for which he campaigned cut £400 million from Northern Ireland's Budget over the next four years.

Mr McCallister: Earlier in his speech, the Member said that the new Government had to clear up the mess that had been left by the old Government. He should lay the blame where it is, as he did in the earlier part of his speech.

Mr Humphrey: It was not me who apportioned blame but the leader of your party.

Many people will take the view that failure to deliver the Programme for Government is a

negative return for the previous Programme for Government 2008-2011. Who could have predicted the collapse? No one could have predicted it — not world markets, the World Bank or huge conglomerates.

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

Mr Humphrey: It is important that the debate proceeds in a mature way, that we have governance —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Humphrey: It is important that the Government move forward responsibly, collectively and collegiately in order to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Programme for Government. It has already been said that the Executive have had to deal with a number of challenges, particularly over the past year or year and a half. The £4 billion in British Government cuts and the challenge of trying to mitigate those cuts was the most significant hurdle to overcome. It has to be said that a lot of constructive work has been done and was done at that time to try to mitigate the cuts. The example of using initiative to come up with solutions is what the public expect of the Assembly. The work to counter Budget cuts needs to be ongoing.

It is the job of the new Executive and Assembly to agree a Programme for Government. It would not have made any sense — indeed, it would have been presumptuous — to have set a four-year Programme for Government in the mouth of an election, as other parties previously suggested doing.

I listened to the proposer of the motion, Mr Bradley, and there are a number of points that we all agree on. I agree with him about pushing for further fiscal powers to be transferred so that we can take control of our own fiscal destiny, ensure that we can further mitigate the cuts and ensure that they do not hit the most vulnerable in society, as they are doing now.

This Programme for Government also needs to address the big challenges that we face as a society: poverty, deprivation, investment, job creation etc. The economy is a main priority, but so must be the protection of people, especially

the vulnerable in our community, against the negative effects of the current economic situation, which can put grandparents, families with unemployed parents, single parents and many others —

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I note that both he and the previous Member mentioned difficulties that the Executive were having with cuts. Those difficulties apply across Europe and in the United States, as the Member will accept. In the South of Ireland, it took only one week for Fine Gael and Labour to agree a Programme for Government. Your party is opposed to the cuts in the South of Ireland, yet it is implementing them here in the North on behalf of the British Government.

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for her intervention. The way that Fine Gael and Labour are operating down South quite clearly is not working. That will play out over the next few years. She referred to other European Governments, but this Assembly and Executive are constrained in their powers and in what they can do, which needs to be recognised.

In reference to last year and the events that took place, our party took a position to try to mitigate the impact of the cuts as much as it possibly could. When we were deciding on how to approach the issue of the Budget, our approach was not the same as the SDLP's, which was to put the Budget in place right away across all Departments: our approach was about trying to mitigate the impact of the cuts. In doing so, we identified £1 billion of revenue-raising initiatives to try to ensure that the cuts had less impact on the most vulnerable in our society. As we know, the SDLP had nothing to bring forward in that regard, and it was quite clear in the elections this year that the public recognised our efforts more than those of the SDLP.

The Programme for Government must adequately cover those points and set clear and tangible targets. The emphasis should be on getting it right. We should not have another rush job. At the time of the last Programme for Government, everybody was in agreement that the priority was the economy. Given developments since then, it is clear that that has not changed. I look forward to seeing what the Minister puts forward as a result of the work that has been ongoing over the summer on putting a Programme for Government in place.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the motion and agree that the publication of a draft Programme for Government must be a priority for the Executive. The UK, Irish, Scottish and Welsh Governments have all produced programmes, and the Northern Ireland Executive must now show that they too have listened to the public and have a vision and plan for their community. The mandatory nature of our coalition Government makes that a more complicated task. However, the people who voted us into this Assembly demand that we deliver solutions to the social and economic challenges that we face.

Those challenges are clear and stark. There is a need to attract investment and to encourage indigenous enterprise, particularly export-led, in order to grow a dynamic and high-value knowledge-based economy that will create the jobs and growth that we need. There is also a need to address our productivity gap and economic inactivity by equipping our constituents with the relevant skills to fulfil their potential and gain employment. There is also a need to prioritise opportunities for youth and protection for the most vulnerable, including older people and those in poverty and social deprivation.

The biggest challenge, however, for this community remains the human and financial cost of division. Other programmes for government speak of era-changing, convention-challenging, radical reform and of government guided by the needs of the many rather than the greed of the few.

In a context of budgetary restrictions that are affecting health, education, public transport and other front line services, there is a moral and financial imperative to address an estimated £1 billion a year that is wasted on managing a divided society. For economic recovery and social inclusion, we must make tackling the cost of division more than just rhetoric and make it a genuine priority of a new Programme for Government. We also need concrete proposals. The people of Northern Ireland have moved well beyond satisfaction with political stability rather than violence, and they now demand delivery from the Assembly.

11.00 am

The vision of the Programme for Government for Northern Ireland should be threefold. First, it should be for a shared society; secondly, it should be for a dynamic economy and efficient public services; and thirdly, it should be for

sustainability. The values on which it should be based are inclusion, fairness and opportunity, and the key overarching approaches should be early intervention and preventative spending.

A Programme for Government must have clear objectives with target delivery dates, financial allocations and specific legislative priorities that can be monitored and challenged by interested parties, including, as the Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister mentioned, Assembly Committees at regular review periods.

I understand that the Ulster Unionist Party has published Programme for Government proposals. I welcome that. I believe that we should have enough will and, I would hope, wit in the Assembly to work together and agree a robust and effective programme with real outcomes for local people. My party published a legislative programme in May, which, although not exhaustive, also set out specific priorities that, if delivered, would grasp the opportunity to create a devolution that meets the needs of the community.

Our proposals have nine key themes, and the specific legislative proposals for each are available in detail online. The first theme is a shared future, which includes a shared housing Bill; the second is a rebalanced economy with a corporation tax Bill and a renewable energy support Bill; and the third is education and skills, which includes an early education and care Bill to tackle the need for affordable childcare, with a lead Department on the issue. Preschool provision, a shared and integrated education Bill and an education and skills authority Bill are also under that theme. The other themes are modern public services, health and well-being, better government to include the much-needed local government review of public administration and a governance Bill to place a duty on the Executive to co-operate. The themes of having a safer community, a fairer society and a green economy are also included.

There will be other proposals, and I welcome the debate on what exactly the Assembly should do to improve the lives of citizens in Northern Ireland. If the Executive can agree a clear vision, clear priorities and a partnership approach between the public, private and community and voluntary sectors for the Programme for Government, I believe that it is possible to demonstrate that devolution can deliver.

Mr Hamilton: There is no doubt that a Programme for Government is an important if not a vital and pivotal document in any jurisdiction, not least in Northern Ireland. Self-evidently, the sooner an Executive can produce that document as is practically possible the better. To that extent, I agree with the motion. However, the complaints about why it has taken so long to be produced are misplaced.

Mr Lyttle, like others, mentioned that, by its very nature, the system of government that we have, which has five parties in a mandatory coalition, makes it more difficult to produce such a document. Indeed, it is not just five parties in an Executive but five parties with fundamentally different views on a wide range of issues. That makes it much more difficult than may be the case elsewhere to produce a document such as a Programme for Government. That system also slows things down, and we saw that with lots of other major issues that we struggled with over the past four years. I would be happy and I am sure that many Members would be happy to see a different form of government that would speed things up. As far as I can recall, however, the party that tabled the motion still opposes a different form of government that would speed things up. The SDLP cannot have it both ways. It cannot complain about the system that grinds things to a halt on many occasions yet oppose any changes to it.

Mr D Bradley: The Member will recall what I said. We are already six months on from the Budget, and the work has still not been undertaken. There is no point in trying to excuse that by saying that there are five partners in the coalition. We have already wasted six months. Had we used that time productively, we would be almost there with a Programme for Government.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Hamilton: The Member does not have to ask me what has been done in that time. He can go and ask his party colleague the current Minister of the Environment. I am not sure how long he will be in post; he might want to talk to the man to his left about that. The Minister of the Environment has been involved, as have all other Ministers. Indeed, the Member's party leader has been involved in party leaders' meetings. I understand that one will take place today to discuss further the Programme for Government and other issues.

Work has been ongoing over the period. Time has been taken to involve everyone in a much more inclusive process that will ultimately result in a better Programme for Government document than came out of the previous process. Not least, there will be a system for monitoring the many targets, which was a criticism of the previous Programme for Government that we all shared. The question of whether time has been used productively is one about which the Member should have a conversation with his colleague the Minister of the Environment.

Mr Campbell: Does the Member agree that, although we have heard comments about the delay in the Programme for Government and other issues regarding the four-year term, there is a contrast between the events that are unfolding in this mandate and those in previous mandates, when we were in and out of the revolving door at Stormont nearly every other week? Contrasts can be made, and they are not altogether flattering for those who are making the criticism.

Mr Hamilton: The Member, using his experience, makes a very fair point. There is an old adage that no Parliament should bind its successor. Similarly, no Assembly should bind its successor. I do not know, but perhaps the SDLP had no ambitions to win the election. Perhaps it was quite happy and content —

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: No, I will not give way. I have lost enough time.

Perhaps the SDLP had no ambitions to win the election and have a greater influence on the Programme for Government than it had on the previous Programme for Government. It is only right and proper, not least because of the many fundamental changes that there have been, that it was delayed until after an election and that the House and the people of this country were not dictated to about what the Programme for Government for the next four years should be.

As others have said, the question has to be "What will actually fundamentally change between the previous Programme for Government and the one that we are about to produce, notwithstanding the changes that there have been?". Mr Bradley, in moving the motion, talked about the imbalance in the economy and the need to prioritise jobs. Those priorities were

front and centre in the previous Programme for Government, and they will be front and centre in the next Programme for Government. Government may continue to propose different ways in which to tackle those issues. It is not as if Departments are not doing anything. Departments are addressing those issues and a host of others as we speak. Indeed, other issues, such as a crystallisation of the corporation tax question, may arise over the consultation period and have an effect on the Programme for Government that they would not have had six or nine months ago.

What annoys me most about the SDLP's motion, even though I agree with its sentiments, is that, even if we were to produce a Programme for Government today and set it down in front of you, you would probably still disagree with it. You would probably still vote against it. That is what you did before.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that all remarks should be made through the Chair.

Mr Hamilton: Mr Bradley cited the Cultúrlann centre — excuse my pronunciation — as a great example of the previous Programme for Government delivering, yet he and his colleagues all voted against that Programme for Government. Of course, his current leader did not vote against it — she trotted through the Aye Lobby in support of it with the rest of us — but the rest of the Member's party voted against it.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Hamilton: You cannot have it both ways. Work is ongoing. I look forward to the draft document coming to the House. Now that such enthusiasm has been shown for —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time.

Mr Hamilton: — a new Programme for Government, I hope that everyone will endorse it.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. It is entirely correct that a Programme for Government that will underpin spending plans should be brought forward. I agree that, in the normal cycle of government, good practice is that that should happen in advance of a Budget. However, over the past year or 18 months, we have not had a normal cycle of government. The election in Britain produced the current Government, who, as

others remarked, slashed the Budget available to the Assembly. We have also been through an election here, which took up some of the six-month period that Mr Bradley referred to. It was probably late last year or early this year when we began to get a sense of the full implications of the British Government's approach to our finances, which allowed us to begin to plan our Budget process. Allied to that was the raid on our EYF stock by the Treasury.

The previous Executive's priority was to get a Budget together using their reduced resources, while keeping a full sense of that reduction, so that they could try to protect jobs, protect the vulnerable and protect front line services. I think that that was the correct approach. It was also correct to try to identify revenue-raising opportunities across the Executive to support those priorities.

At that time, while we were struggling, other parties that now look for a Programme for Government issued calls to get on with setting the Budget. The party proposing the motion predicted that we would come up with a one-year Budget to get us through an election. However, the Executive knuckled down to the work and came up with a four-year Budget. As my colleague said, they also came up with additional ideas for raising revenue to address our priorities of trying to offset the worst effects of the cuts imposed by Westminster. The Assembly election showed clearly that the electorate endorsed that approach from the parties leading the Executive.

Work and consultation has been ongoing on the new Programme for Government. I understand that a range of stakeholders has been consulted. The Executive subcommittee on the economy has yet to complete its work, which is key to the Programme for Government. The Budget review group's ongoing process of work will also contribute to the Programme for Government debate. I want a Programme for Government that is relevant to the current circumstances and challenges and ambitious in its big ideas for economic growth and tries to give some certainty and confidence to the Executive and Assembly's priorities over the coming years, even in very uncertain times.

We have a number of choices. We could produce a motherhood-and-apple-pie Programme for Government that tries to satisfy everybody and does not produce very much. We could gather

up all the targets across the Departments, set the red, amber and green standard against them and cut and paste them into a Programme for Government. Alternatively, we could try to get a strategic and focused Programme for Government that continues to prioritise growing the economy; improving educational attainment and skill levels; reducing inequalities and tackling fuel poverty; and expanding on the undoubted benefits of closer co-operation and harmonisation, North and South. Continued, focused work is required to get that right for people, and the Programme for Government must be different to that which we had previously so that it takes account of our circumstances.

I listened carefully to the remarks made by the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, who has gone now. I hope that they signal a new approach from all parties. Others commented on the difficulties involved in getting five parties to agree a Programme for Government. That can be difficult in any circumstances, but two of the parties have taken a kind of hokey-cokey approach to the Executive, with one foot in and one foot out. They have been in the Executive and in opposition at the same time. When the Executive were trying to deal with these difficult circumstances on an awayday last year, one Minister from the Ulster Unionist Party, who had the biggest spending Department in the Executive, turned up, sat shtum for the entire meeting and left without making a single contribution.

I hope that Mr Elliott's remarks herald a new approach and that all parties will pull together in delivering a Programme for Government and not sit with one foot in the Executive and one foot out. That argument clearly fell flat with the electorate in the Assembly election this year. We need to pull together and try to deliver something that is of benefit to people. We must not simply press for things or vote for the Budget in the Executive and against it when it comes to the Assembly. We must genuinely co-operate and have a genuinely cohesive approach, as Mr Elliott was arguing —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Murphy: We need to get full support for a Programme for Government that puts the electorate first and addresses the serious issues that we face.

11.15 am

Mr Spratt: The Programme for Government lies at the heart of the work that we are doing in the Assembly. It is usual for a Government to set their programme and then to base their Budget on that programme. However, that was not possible the last time around, and some reasons for that have just been given. It was not possible because Departments and arm's-length bodies needed to have their budget in place to continue with their work. We all know why that happened: it was because of the shenanigans and politicking going on among some parties in the Executive. Given what the Chair of the OFMDFM Committee said, I hope that there is a change of view on that and that everyone in the Executive will work collectively and carry their responsibilities.

We need a Programme for Government in order to set targets and measure progress in attaining those targets. There were five key priorities in the Programme for Government for 2008-2011. When the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) received a report on 23 June 2010, the results were mixed. However, the fourth priority, which was to invest in building infrastructure, received a score of 73%. As Chair of the Regional Development Committee, I am pleased that the Programme for Government's fourth priority received such a high score.

Like all other Departments, the Department for Regional Development (DRD) will contribute significantly to the Programme for Government in a number of ways in the future. For example, the Department will promote sustainable transport programmes and will seek to increase employment by undertaking significant capital roads programmes. Improved infrastructure will boost the economy by making it easier and more comfortable for tourists to visit many of the great attractions that we have in Northern Ireland.

The Department is committed to improving people's health by investing in cycle routes and encouraging people to cycle and walk instead of using the car. That will have a significant effect in helping the environment by lowering CO2 emissions. Investment in a high-quality public transport system that services all the main arterial routes would also reduce the number of cars using the roads, thus easing congestion, and speed up travelling times for many people. That will have a positive effect on the economy.

All the issues that I have highlighted should and, I hope, will be included in the Programme for Government. It is important that that programme comes about as quickly as possible and that Committees have time to discuss the budgets that have been allocated, to discuss and set the essential targets and to ensure that those will be monitored in a meaningful way.

In these difficult financial times, it is vital to ensure value for money for the taxpayer, as every penny must be spent appropriately. There is certainly no room for waste in government at this time. There must be a detailed look at budgets in Committees and all the rest of it, and those need to be monitored regularly. I hope that the PFG will be agreed by the Executive collectively and that the Committees will work together to make sure that there is delivery on programmes and absolutely no waste in any of those programmes. We support the motion, and I hope that the Minister will be able to tell us that we will get a Programme for Government in the not-too-distant future.

Mr McCallister: I support the motion. It is vital that we get a Programme for Government, and the parties have unanimously agreed that we should have one. The debate seems to be more about how quickly we can do that. I note that Mr Hamilton used the old adage about not binding your successor, yet, in March, we set a Budget that was obviously intended to continue into this session.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Let me finish the point. I would use another old adage: if you do not know where you are going, any road will take you there. The problem is about where the Executive are going now.

Mr Hamilton: The Member is citing the motto of the modern Ulster Unionist Party. Does he not accept, however, that a Budget is different from a Programme for Government? Departments and their agencies and the people of Northern Ireland cannot live without a Budget, but we can live without a Programme for Government. *[Interruption.]* It does not have to happen in the same way. Is it the position of the Member and his party that we did not need a Budget in place in order to fund the services that are delivered by Departments?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr McCallister: My point, to which the Member did not bother to reply, was that we have bound the successor Assembly. He says that we do not need a Programme for Government, but his colleague Mr Spratt has just said that we do. Mr Humphrey said that ideally we would have one. There is some division on the DUP Benches on whether we should progress with a Programme for Government. Clearly, that party is not too worried about whether we get one this month, next month or next year.

We will have no direction in this Government without a Programme for Government. It goes deeper than that, to the way in which Ministers function in government. Ministers flout the ministerial code and make solo runs because we have no Programme for Government with which to bind them. That is why, before the election, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, Tom Elliott, set out the party's position that we should agree a Programme for Government after the election.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: I just want to make this point. My party's position was that we should agree a Programme for Government after the election so that the Government would have a drive and a focus and know where they were going.

Mr Humphrey: It is unfortunate that the Member seeks to create division on these issues, when collective and collegiate responsibility is what should be coming forward from a Government in which his party sits. We are not going to take lectures from his party about the conduct of Ministers when its two Ministers defied the code of conduct and voted against the Budget.

Mr McCallister: Yes, and I am glad that they did. We argued against the Budget. I can safely say that, if we looked into the ministerial voting record, we could find examples of breaches of the ministerial code by just about everyone who has held ministerial office. That statement shows that the DUP has one set of rules for itself and its friends in Sinn Féin and another for the rest of us.

The real reason for the current situation is not that we have a five-party coalition. The real blockage is between the DUP and Sinn Féin, who cannot agree on the big issues. We have had no progress on education, on whether we are to have an 11-plus or move away from that. We have had no agreement on the Education

and Skills Authority, although some sort of fudge may be cooking on that issue. We have no agreement on a shared future; Mr Lyttle made a point about the cost of division. There is no agreement between the two largest parties in the Executive on any of the big issues. That is where the blockages are in this Government. We cannot get a Programme for Government because they cannot agree on those issues.

Last week, I attended an event at which junior Minister Anderson spoke about health and about improving children's lives. We have strategies for reducing child poverty and fuel poverty, but we have no way of achieving those aims. We had two debates yesterday, the first of which was about fuel poverty and how to implement cross-cutting measures to deal with that issue. We had a debate about the Police Ombudsman, but the real debate was about the fact that we do not have the structures to deal with that matter. We have had neither sight nor sign of how we might get agreement to deal with that. We have no agreement on how to deal with the past; on how to build a shared future; on housing; on how to get Departments out of their silos; or on cross-cutting issues such as a suicide strategy, child poverty, health and education working together on special educational needs to determine who delivers what and who, between the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and DSD, delivers supported living. We have no agreement on any of those issues, which is to the shame of the House and, in particular, the lead parties in government. OFMDFM took the lead in setting the agenda, yet, six months after the Budget, there is still no sign of a Programme for Government, which everyone here agrees we need. What is to be in it is up for discussion, which is why we pushed so hard for talks after the election.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr McCallister: A Programme for Government would give the Executive direction and a focus. What is the purpose of having a Government unless you have a direction in which to use the power that people have elected you to use?

Mr Eastwood: I am not long a Member, and I could very well be accused of lacking lengthy legislative, never mind governmental, experience. Perhaps longer-serving Members, particularly those from the dominant parties

in the Executive, will therefore enlighten me if I am wrong in assuming certain things about an Administration who deem themselves responsible and credible. The need for a Programme for Government, moulded to incorporate a budgetary framework, is one such assumption that I hold, a programme that clearly articulates the spending and legislative priorities of the sitting Administration, providing certainty and hope to the economy and the people. It is worth noting that, after recent elections, such programmes were compiled speedily by the Scottish Administration and the Dublin Government. Yet, as of now, in the midst of a financial crisis that has engulfed this island and Europe, the Assembly, under the leadership of the DUP and Sinn Féin, has failed to produce that vital piece of governmental architecture.

It is not as if our people can afford such negligence and inaction. Cuts to public spending of £4 billion have been on the horizon for a considerable period. Unemployment, especially among our young, is increasing, and our private sector has not been provided with a stimulus to negate the austerity that successive Budgets will inevitably inflict. Economic forecasts, as analysed by PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PWC), describe the Northern economy's prospects as, at best, lacklustre, with growth in GNP unlikely to reach 1%. That growth forecast was calculated before the most recent worsening of the European debt crisis. It is clear, therefore, that effective and efficient government has never been needed so badly. Sadly, though, the Executive have failed to live up to the challenge at hand. Ultimately, if the Assembly does not use fully the powers at its disposal, we should not be allowed to complain about the lack of economic levers, and it would be a missed opportunity to produce lasting political priorities in public administration.

In my constituency of Derry, the lack of such clarity has led to delays and uncertainty around key economic and social programmes. Derry was promised a significant expansion of student numbers at the Magee campus, investment in our roads infrastructure and improvements to our dilapidated railway line. Those promises were subsequently punctuated with the proviso of "not yet".

A comprehensive Programme for Government would go some way to removing what, at times, can be cynical political posturing in favour of firm governmental commitments. Even at this

late stage, there is still time for the Executive to draft a Programme for Government that would instil creativity in the manner in which we provide public services and breathe life and growth into small and medium-sized businesses.

These institutions are a remarkable achievement, and I have no doubt that almost all Members have contributed in various ways to that achievement. If, however, our ambition fails to see beyond that achievement and provide a mature discourse on the delivery of government, the promise of those institutions will become hollow. Providing a progressive Programme for Government would mark a small beginning to ensuring that such stagnation is prevented from taking root.

Mr T Clarke: I have sat and listened for some time, and nobody could disagree with the sentiments expressed in the motion: everybody wants to see a Programme for Government that delivers for Northern Ireland.

It is quite ironic that the proposers of the motion are from the SDLP. We heard various speeches yesterday from the candidates who are running for the leadership of the party. I heard a discussion on the radio about the qualifications of the former deputy First Minister and his inability to speak the Irish language. We have had a contribution today from Dominic Bradley: perhaps he is going to put his name forward for the Irish presidency also.

11.30 am

I listened to my colleagues on the Benches to my right. They talked about the five-party coalition and the problems between Sinn Féin and the DUP. In the past, we had a Government here who were formed between the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists. Maybe things seemed to flow easier, but that was because the Ulster Unionists conceded everything that the SDLP wanted. The difference now is that there is a party in power that holds its position and holds other parties to account. We are taking lectures from about three brands of Ulster Unionist all sitting on the one Bench at the same time. They ask for a cohesive approach to a Programme for Government; perhaps they are in the position that they are today because they are not very cohesive in their approach.

We sat here for a time before the summer recess and shortly after the election, and we have now been back for a short time. There

were changes in the Administration team after the election. People's priorities have changed, and we see that no better than in relation to some of the priorities of the Ulster Unionist Party when it held the Health Ministry. There was a can't-do attitude, but we now have someone in that position with a can-do attitude. As times and positions change, priorities also change. Now we are in a position in which we have settled down after the election and Ministers have settled into their new positions.

Mr D Bradley: Is the Member going to say anything about the Programme for Government? *[Laughter.]*

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

Mr T Clarke: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker —

Mr B McCrea: Speak up.

Mr T Clarke: Sorry, there is a mouth to the right.

Mr B McCrea: I will take the intervention. We have heard an awful lot of waffle from the man to my left, but he has not said what he is going to do. He said that everybody else has done it wrong and everybody else cannot do anything, but let us hear what he has to say. Let us hear something positive from his party for a change.

Mr T Clarke: Basil has done very well in polls that have been conducted about speaking in the House. They have never created one for waffle, but I know that, if there were one for waffle today, he would undoubtedly win the prize. I will not take lectures from —

Mr McCallister: What about the Programme for Government?

Mr T Clarke: If you were listening —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: All remarks through the Chair, please.

Mr T Clarke: Although some parties find it easy to dish out criticisms, they find it difficult to accept criticisms that are levelled at them. There are two forms of the Ulster Unionist Party sitting, with one on the Front Bench and one on the Back Bench, so, as I said, we have different brands of Ulster Unionist trying to give us different messages. If Basil has a problem listening, he should have listened to what I said at the outset: no one should have a problem with accepting the thrust of the motion. It is just a wee bit ironic from the people who proposed it. There is work

going on in the background, which I commend. Obviously, any right-thinking person would wish that to come forward as soon as possible so that we can get on with the work at hand. Given that there has been a change in ministerial positions, priorities change. We have come through a period of recession, and the priorities have changed also. I welcome the motion.

Mrs Cochrane: I gladly welcome the motion before the House today. Although some Members have questioned the delay in bringing forward the Programme for Government from the Executive table, rightly or wrongly, now is not the time to point fingers or assign blame. Instead, we need to look forward. I believe that our constituents want us to look forward at how we are to achieve a more realistic, sustainable and necessary Programme for Government.

It was December of last year when the Finance Minister first brought forward the Executive's draft Budget for 2011-15, which proposed departmental spending allocations for the next four years. In the nine months that have since passed, constituents throughout Northern Ireland have encountered further changes and increased challenges due to pressures from the current economic climate. Those challenges serve to highlight the need for, and subsequently to shape, any renewed Programme for Government.

In May of this year, the consumer price index reached 4.5%, dealing a critical blow to the incomes of the population. Local households have also seen the biggest fall in disposable income for more than 30 years, and such falling incomes are a genuine obstacle to economic recovery. Furthermore, it is anticipated that, this year and next year, recovery in Northern Ireland will be much slower than the UK average. The situation in the housing sector also continues to decline, with property prices having fallen considerably over the past three years. In correlation with that, bank lending levels have also been restricted, a situation that seems unlikely to improve any time soon. Finally, although unemployment levels sit at 7.2%, that figure does not reflect adequately the unusually high rate of economically inactive individuals, which stands well above the UK average and is the highest rate across the UK regions.

Ideally, with the benefit of hindsight and capitalising on the previous six months' experience since the Budget was agreed, we

should, arguably, be in a better position now to create an informed and reflective Programme for Government to suit our predefined budgetary commitments. In recent days, we have seen how restrictive and ruthless our departmental budgets can be. That has been evidenced by cuts to front line services in A&E departments.

In contrast, however, debates in the Chamber have served to highlight genuine opportunities for savings, efficiency and job creation. Only last week, Members made their voices heard on the topic of the green new deal and the need for cross-departmental working. Too often in Departments, actions and objectives are pursued in silos, and any new Programme for Government needs to consider seriously a more joined-up approach between the Departments where flexibility, co-operation and cohesive objectives can lead to a more realistic financial standing.

The pursuit of a shared future in Northern Ireland will also contribute further to efficiency savings. That will translate into shared services, shared housing, shared education and a more sustainable economy for generations to come. We need to end the duplication of services in our society.

As is evidenced by the debate, we all recognise the difficulties that this Administration is faced with at such a financially challenging time, but it is essential that we follow the example laid down by our counterparts in Scotland and Wales. They both secured agreements on their Budgets and PFGs, and they now find themselves in a position where their policy destination is planned and where they can choose the financial routes by which to get there. Ultimately, we can no longer afford to choose our route without first setting our destination, nor do we wish once again to become the poster child for putting the cart before the horse. I recognise the urgent need for an up-to-date Programme for Government, and the Alliance Party supports the motion.

Mr B McCrea: Thus far, some interesting points have been raised. Some Members have called for unity, five-party coalitions and working together but, in their speeches, have not been able to help themselves from getting stuck in and settling a few scores. I listened intently to Conor Murphy, and I noticed that he did not engage in that aspect, which is to his credit. However, he is trying to talk about a hokey-

cokey type of government. It is not clear to me who is doing the hokey-cokey. Was he talking about Sinn Féin and the DUP, or someone else? *[Interruption.]* I am not sure whether that was a comment from the party to my left.

Mr Weir: It is obvious even to a disinterested observer that if there is any reference to hokey-cokey, it is a reference to the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP. On the one hand, those parties want to take their places in the Executive and, presumably, if any beneficial announcement is made, take credit for it. On the other hand, they want to be able to denounce the Executive willy-nilly, so they are half in and half out. That is the very definition of doing the hokey-cokey.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr B McCrea: I was hoping to engage both sides of the House in the argument, but it is the party to my left that is disinterested. He talks to me about Ministers being in and out. I recall that there used to be a situation where the DUP took their Ministries but did not actually sit in the Executive. There is an interesting parallel here. Parties may take sideswipes, but I really want to know how the £4 billion of Tory cuts is somebody else's fault and why we cannot do anything else. Is the party to my left saying to the House that it wants the Government of this country to spend more money than they raise in taxes? Is that the profligate and squandering policy that it supports or does it want some form of proper fiscal attitude and a Government that try to deal with things? What exactly is the DUP position?

I was surprised that Mr Simon Hamilton, a man who normally comes across with a well-argued and well-articulated point of view, told the House that it does not matter whether we have a Programme for Government and that we can do without it. The reason why it does not matter, colleagues, is because the Programme for Government is done through a sordid back-room deal between the DUP and Sinn Féin. Of course, they can never agree until it gets close to an election because they then think, "Oh my goodness, we have done no legislation and agreed nothing." There has been no progress on a shared future, no resolution of education, no real attack on economic problems, no drive to reduce youth unemployment and no drive to sort

out the travesty of teachers not getting jobs. There is absolutely nothing.

So when people try to lecture us about what we have not done, let me tell you clearly that we want to engage in proper debate. When people say things — as they have said before — I acknowledge that that is a positive contribution. However, parties say to us that we have to be part of a Government and have to be in a coalition but that we are not allowed to disagree with anything because they have decided what we will do — that is not how government works.

Mr Murphy: I appreciate the Member saying that his party — it made the point several times during the previous Executive — wants to be part of a genuine discussion. However, when we took ourselves out of these institutions and out of the normal run of Executive meetings to knock our heads together to come up with solutions to our difficulties, his colleague, who, at that time, had the biggest Executive budget of any Minister, came to a meeting, which was minuted and at which disagreement and all sorts of ideas and a genuine discussion were welcome on the table, with absolutely no contribution whatsoever. He did not speak a single word and left the meeting without giving any ideas, any disagreements and any solutions. He did so to the embarrassment of his party leader at the time, and I think that he continued privately to be an embarrassment to the rest of the party until it got rid of him after the election.

Mr B McCrea: I am at a disadvantage as I was not party to those discussions. However, if you treat people badly in the Executive or anywhere else, that will be their natural reaction.

I am pleased to hear the howling from the DUP because you know that you are winning when its Members start to yap. All they know how to do is personal invective. I was — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr B McCrea: I was going to have a proper discussion on this but, unfortunately, all you get from the party to my left is howling and heckling. It has absolutely no contribution to make, and, you know what, this will find you out in the next three years because you have no ideas, no vision and no future. These people could not run a party to save their lives.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the presence of junior Minister Anderson for the debate, although,

with no disrespect to her, it would have been courteous to the House had both the First Minister and the deputy First Minister — wherever they are today — been here to hear the contributions to the debate on the Programme for Government.

It is all very well bantering about, but more than 27,000 construction workers have lost their jobs over the past three years, and a number of small businesses that depended on them have closed down. Last week, some young people were left without a place at college, university or training and no prospect of employment. That is the reality in today's community.

11.45 am

Members spoke about the four-year Budget that was agreed but has, in the past couple of weeks, already been amended. For the record, I note a comment that was made on the Budget by PriceWaterhouseCoopers, which was:

“deeply concerned at the almost complete absence of economic and social targets and outcomes underpinning the draft Budget and Departmental plans for the period to 2014-15 and believe that the draft Budget and associated Departmental spending plans have more to do with ‘getting through the next four years’ than driving holistic policies intended to stimulate economic regeneration and social inclusion.”

That is a damning indictment of the previous Executive. Here we are, six months into a new Executive, and, face it, many of the people around that table are not strangers to each other, and we still have no Programme for Government. As other Members outlined, we have important decisions to make. We have decisions around cohesion, sharing and integration — a policy that went out for consultation last year, with 27 October 2010 the closing date for responses.

In recent weeks and years, we have had a number of documents dealing with the past. In fact, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister asked the Victims' Commission to come back with a document, which it did in June 2010. Yet, we are no further forward; nothing has been published and there is no strategy around all of that. We have a Rural White Paper, for which I am grateful to the then Minister, Michelle Gildernew, for publishing on 23 March. However, that Rural White Paper has cross-departmental objectives, so when will we see from the other Departments whether they will

live up to the aspirations published in the Rural White Paper?

The Programme for Government that —

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. She raised the issue of the Rural White Paper, which is not an area in which I have particular expertise. Does that not show one deficiency in any potential Programme for Government? She mentioned “high aspirations”, which will clearly be in any Programme for Government. However, the detail of that will need to be worked out between Departments, and, in particular, with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). Clearly, whatever is produced shortly as regards a Programme for Government will require a lot of detailed work at departmental level. So, although we agree that it is useful to have a Programme for Government, the detail to which we must drill down will always be below that contained in the Programme for Government anyway.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

I accept that, Mr Weir, but, nonetheless, is it not also the function of government to produce a Programme for Government that gives a high-level strategic vision, which other Departments subscribe to and work towards? Mr Weir is turning the methodology on its head. Members will know that the nature of the Executive and Departments demands cross-cutting strategies and joined-up government. That is not what we are getting. It is not what we have experienced over the past four years. Many commentators who have watched what went on here for the past four years will not forgive the Executive and the House if we do not start to deliver for the citizens we represent in what are very difficult and mean times for everyone in society.

Mr Campbell: I know that political lecturers and anoraks up and down the country regard the Programme for Government as a burning issue of the day. Night and day, they wonder what they will do at Stormont about the Programme for Government. They toil manfully and womanfully every day and every week, saying, “What are we going to do about the Programme for Government?” That is what they say — not.

In all seriousness, as my colleague from North Belfast said, it is important that a Programme for Government is worked out, because it is preferable, useful and people can identify with it and see the progress that is made towards implementing it. However, if it is absolutely dyed-in-the-wool essential, I wonder how we managed to get by without any Programmes for Government during the 25 years of direct rule. In fact, those who are now lambasting the difficulties in getting a Programme for Government had a problem getting government to work for about four or five years, never mind a Programme for Government. However, we will set that aside.

Mr Nesbitt: Is the Member speaking in favour of direct rule?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Campbell: Sometimes, I despair. If I had been in favour of direct rule, I would not have voted for the system that we have now. I did. With all its faults, it is better than direct rule. The point I was making was that, in all of the years of direct rule, there was neither the need, the desire nor the demand for Programmes for Government, and they got by. It was not great and it was not ideal. What we now have is better, but they got by, thus proving that you do not absolutely have to have a Programme for Government to get government working. That is the point.

I think it was Mr McCallister, when talking about the difficulty that the DUP and Sinn Féin had in getting a Programme for Government, who used the phrase "their friends in Sinn Féin", and I have heard the honourable Member for Lagan Valley talk about our "bedfellows" in Sinn Féin. I have heard that mentioned on a couple of occasions by Ulster Unionists, and it keeps coming up. There must be some clarity. Those critics who lambaste us either say that we are friends and bedfellows with Sinn Féin or that we cannot get agreement with them, but it cannot be both. I am afraid that people will have to come to some sort of outcome on those criticisms.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Campbell: As long as it is a short intervention.

Mr B McCrea: It will be short. The Member has said that it cannot be both. Either they are bedfellows or they cannot get agreement. Which is it?

Mr Campbell: At least it was short, which is a first. The issue is very simple.

Mr B McCrea: Are you going to answer?

Mr Campbell: Yes, and if I get an opportunity, I will. The answer is very straightforward. We have a system of government here that people voted for. We are in there, but we are not bedfellows with people we do not particularly like. However, it is the system that we have, and the constructive criticism that we offer every week of every month of every year will continue. Hopefully, that answers the question. I will try to get on to the substance of the matter before somebody complains about not getting into the Programme for Government.

The last Programme for Government had at its very heart the economy. Whether that was regarded as prescient or whatever, I hope that people will say that that should again be at the centre of the Programme for Government. People are not talking about whether we have a Programme for Government; they are talking about getting jobs, better paid jobs, improving the economy, improving our health service and improving our education service. That is what people are talking about, rather than the absolute paramount need to get a Programme for Government. Hopefully, we will get that done and dusted fairly quickly.

We will be able to see the progress that needs to be made on our transportation infrastructure, including railways. I think that the honourable Member for Foyle forgot which constituency he represents: he was talking about Edenderry, Ballinderry or Londonderry. However, I remind him that it is Foyle. He talked about the railway system. We do have to try to upgrade the railway system, particularly between Coleraine and Londonderry, and we have to get the £75 million required to do that. There is no point in just demanding that it be done; we must get the money to do it. Those issues need to be resolved and progress needs to be made, and I am sure that it will. We will continue to make that progress in this House whether people like to criticise or lambaste us, and whether they are in or out, or they cannot make up their mind whether they are both in and out and shaking it all about. However, we will continue to make

that progress, hopefully for the greater good of all the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Nesbitt: We in these islands are in a unique situation: we have coalition Governments in London, Dublin and Belfast. Of course, there is one significant difference: in London, despite the fact that the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats did not realise going into the election that they would end up in a coalition, they came up with a Programme for Government within a week; and, in Dublin, Fine Gael and the Irish Labour Party produced a 64-page document representing their Programme for Government within six days. However, six months on, we have still to produce a document.

Mr Hamilton: The Member cites the UK coalition's agreement and Programme for Government. They produced what would have been his Programme for Government had he been elected — had the people of Strangford not seen sense. Will he enlighten the House as to what progress has been made by that Government on the likes of health reform and justice reform, which were included in that Programme for Government? Those reforms have been stuck in the sidings for some time, because the Government rushed to an agreement just to get it out, but they did not have anything to back it up with.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for Strangford for his intervention. I was about to say that cracks have appeared not only in the coalition programme in London, but in Dublin. Your colleague, or, may I say, your boss the Finance Minister, Sammy Wilson, is very fond of the Latin phrase “*ceteris paribus*”, which means other things being equal. Of course, events impact on a Programme for Government. — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Nesbitt: Mr Hamilton pointed out that, over the course of the next four years, the devolution of corporation tax-varying powers could impact on the Programme for Government. He said that, despite the fact that, only yesterday, Mr Wilson said that he did not envisage corporation tax-varying powers arriving within the term of this Assembly. That is a slightly mixed message, which, perhaps, he might like to clarify later.

I thank the SDLP's Mr Bradley for bringing the debate to the House. As Mr Elliott said, when we discuss the Budget and Programme for Government, it seems to be a question of the cart and the horse. Mrs Kelly mentioned the absence from the Chamber of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. I do not know where they are, but I hope that they are not appearing in front of the ‘Dragons’ Den’ panel on BBC television. If they are, it would be like going in and saying to Deborah Meaden, Duncan Bannatyne and the rest, “Look here, I have a big lump of money. Have you any ideas about what we should do with it?”

The purpose of devolved government is to put the economy first. That was in the previous Programme for Government, and we expect it to be in the next. That applies to the public sector, the private sector and the social economy, but surely it works for those sectors only when we have government that allows access to the decision-makers who give fast and flexible responses to demands. In that regard, I point you to the short-term employment scheme, which has a budget of £19 million. It was introduced last April to try to address the unemployment problem, particularly amongst young people. Six months on, how many jobs have been created under that £19 million scheme? The answer is not one.

I approve of a Programme for Government; I think that it is essential, not merely desirable, as the DUP seems to think. However, it is not necessarily always a good idea. I refer to my time as a user of the Programme for Government, as one of the commissioners for victims and survivors. That body was set up by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which was, of course, our sponsor Department. However, other Departments, particularly the Health Department, the Department for Social Development and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development could have done good work for victims. It was our experience that, if we went to one of those Departments with what we thought was a good idea, it was not assessed on whether it was intrinsically a good idea but according to the extent to which it helped that Department achieve its public service agreements. We can, therefore, tie ourselves in knots with a Programme for Government that is too complicated and does not allow for the fast and flexible government that is the hallmark of good devolution.

I very much approve of today's motion.

12.00 noon

Mr Elliott: We have all talked about the link between the Budget and the Programme for Government, and Mr Campbell has highlighted today and in the past the issue of the Coleraine to Londonderry rail line. We want that issue to be included in the Programme for Government, as was mentioned in a debate last week. The difficulty is that it is not in the Budget. There is no money for it in the Budget. Hence, one failure is that there is no linkage.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for that intervention, and I agree with him. We have a four-year Budget. Last week, we stripped out, I think, £40 million for school fees and over £8 million for on-street parking, which already amounts to two big changes. I put it to the House that the Budget will have to be revisited and that it would be better to form a Programme for Government first.

Mr Allister: On a point of order. Why is it in this debate that only those who are members of parties that support or are part of the Government have been called to speak? Why is there a strategy to suppress any voice from outside the Executive, given the fact that, under Standing Order 17, there is an obligation to have a balance of opinion —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should resume his seat. That is not a point of order.

Mr Allister: It is a point of order.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member not to challenge the Speaker's decision.

Ms M Anderson (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Go raibh míle maith agat. I have listened with a lot of interest to the comments. I agree that, in a perfect world, a Programme for Government would be in place prior to the determination of the final Budget position. Without doubt, I think that we all share that position. Early planning is good, and we all agree with that, but effective planning is better. We do not need a rapidly produced Programme for Government, but we do need the right Programme for Government. That point was made, particularly by Daithí McKay.

Earlier this year, when the Minister of Finance and Personnel presented the Budget to the

Assembly, much was made of the length and timing of the process. William Humphrey and Conor Murphy referred to that. It was suggested that it would be engineered along party political lines. What was the result? The result was a balanced Budget that had the interests of the people at heart. That was against the backdrop of this Executive and the previous Executive facing a £4 billion cut and, as Conor Murphy said, the raid on end-year flexibility. Despite that, the Budget review group and others identified £1.5 billion of additional revenue.

Of course we need to be aware of the importance of having a Programme for Government in place. There is, however, a greater imperative to have a Programme for Government in place that is founded on certainty and characterised by a set of priorities that are relevant and commitments that are ambitious and capable of delivering real change and substantive benefits.

In finalising our expenditure priorities and allocating our available resources to those, we undoubtedly now have a solid footing on which we can produce a new Programme for Government, a footing that certainly did not exist and could not have existed until the completion of the election in May 2011. William Humphrey, Simon Hamilton and Trevor Clarke all agreed with that.

At this point, I am keen to stress to Members that our office has been working steadily, despite some of the comments made in the Chamber that nothing is being done and that perhaps that contributed to the beginning of a process. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our officials have been working steadily behind the scenes since before the dissolution of the previous Assembly, listening to the views and opinions of a wide range of stakeholders and representative bodies and taking early soundings of the issues that matter most. In turn, those discussions have helped us to inform our thinking on how priorities are articulated and on the means by which the document — and, by that, I mean the delivery programme — may be best structured to effect change and bring about the process that we want to achieve. That was articulated by Conor Murphy.

Officials from OFMDFM have been engaging proactively with a number of stakeholders. They have had meetings with a wide range of

individuals and organisations to discuss their ideas and suggestions for the next Programme for Government. Of course, it is very important to engage with stakeholders, but it was even more important when, in the last Executive, at least one Minister would not contribute to the discussions. The discussions that our officials have had have helped us to identify a key series of challenges over the next four years, such as, for example, the need to ensure alignment with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) economic strategy, alignment with the requirement to improve education attainment — and a number of Members have referred to that — and the need to look at skills escalation, reduce inequalities and address issues such as fuel poverty.

Such pre-consultation meetings have helped to highlight the need for real transformational change that is now offered by a new Programme for Government despite the economic challenges facing the North. The meetings highlight the need for a dialogue with individuals, external organisations and stakeholder groups as part of the process of preparing the new Programme for Government. There is a need for constructive dialogue with intermediary bodies and umbrella groups, which, as part of the process of preparing the Programme for Government and as the preparation unfolds, helps to inform the thinking and the underlying strategy.

Running parallel to that work, OFMDFM officials have helped to ensure that there will be complementarity between the Programme for Government and the headline goals contained in Europe 2020. That was mentioned by a number of Members, and, in particular, by the Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. It was also mentioned by Ministers during discussions. That has helped to highlight the need for the North to raise its employment rate and levels of investment in R&D, address the issue of climate change and the promotion of energy efficiency and renewables, raise education levels and promote social inclusion through reducing poverty. Most of those items were mentioned by one Member or another with respect to the kind of Programme for Government that we need to bring forward.

Without doubt, current economic circumstances make equality considerations more relevant than ever. In full recognition of that, and

conscious of our obligations under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, OFMDFM officials, in parallel with the work on preparing a new Programme for Government, have informed and undertaken, at strategic level, an equality impact assessment on the draft programme. That will be further informed by the outcome of the Programme for Government consultation. Officials from across OFMDFM's Programme for Government sustainability and equality units have all been involved in drafting the Programme for Government to date. Of course, officials from other Departments are also involved in the process, so cross-cutting work is taking place, despite what some Members have said.

We need a Programme for Government and — as Dolores Kelly and others have said — it needs to be meaningful. We need one that has at its core the key reforms necessary to create real and meaningful change based on the needs of children, older people, communities that live in deprivation and people who are marginalised and face the challenge of the current recession every day. However, true reforms are not put in place overnight. They need to be researched, developed, discussed and debated, agreed, implemented and then monitored.

I take this opportunity to highlight to Members the value of debate. Only last week, Members tabled a motion, which was almost unanimously supported, that sought to recognise the importance of the green economy in the new Programme for Government. As a Minister in the office of the centre, I had the privilege of responding to that debate, too. Since then, I have asked officials from our office to consider the content of the debate in the context of the draft Programme for Government and to examine ways in which that may be appropriately expressed.

The drafting phase of the work is almost concluded, and we intend to share the draft Programme for Government with our Executive colleagues and to brief the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as Tom Elliott, its Chairperson, asked, with a view to ensuring that the details that we have before us are discussed. We will take all comments and recommendations on board in order to produce a very effective and robust Programme for Government. We will do that as soon as we are in a position to.

Mention was made of the investment strategy and its vital relationship with the Programme for Government. Jimmy Spratt, Dominic Bradley and a number of others remarked on that. As Members will know, the previous Executive spent more on capital investment year on year compared with spend in the years of direct rule. For instance, during 2007-08, £1.4 billion was spent on gross capital investment; in 2008-09, £1.7 billion was spent; and a further £1.7 billion was spent in 2009-2010.

Members will be aware that the investment strategy is under review. Some Members called for that to happen, but they should have known in the first place that it is already happening. It is happening, albeit for the period beyond 2015. However, the Executive must consider the new Programme for Government against a range of options for the next steps of our investment programme, given that many potential projects are to be considered, and there are considerable lead-in times. All of that will have to be taken into account. We will initiate all that during the Programme for Government period. Officials from OFMDFM are liaising with colleagues in the Strategic Investment Board to consider the connectivity of those documents. Once again, that demonstrates that joined-up work is taking place. Without doubt, any suggestion made in the Chamber, by any Member, that Departments are working in silos could not be further from the truth. Joined-up, collaborative work is going on, and we, as new members of the Executive, are encouraging that across Departments.

During the debate, much mention was made of the financial environment within which we are expected to operate over the coming months and years. Dominic Bradley, Daithí McKay, Colum Eastwood and others referred to that. What is critical is how the Programme for Government is delivered in the current challenging climate. It is a challenging climate that we all recognise. Given the financial and resource constraints that we all face, we are now more determined than ever to consider the new Programme for Government, and we will ensure that all of this will encourage and enable connectivity and cohesiveness across all areas of government. Again, that will address the view that has emerged from some Members that there is no connectivity across Departments.

We will do that to ensure that we deliver on our objectives. We expect, demand and will make

sure that Departments work together more closely than ever to tackle the strategic and cross-cutting issues that they must address. We also expect Departments to form mutually beneficial working arrangements with partner organisations that go beyond traditional demarcation lines, and we will be vigorous in our efforts to ensure that that occurs.

12.15 pm

We intend that the focus of the Programme for Government will be strategic and will evolve from the first Programme for Government, which took a more strategic approach through the use of public service agreements supported by a vast swathe of targets and actions. Although that served its purpose, we are seeking to reduce the bureaucracy associated with the previous Programme for Government, in line with our previously stated intention to deliver high-quality and efficient public services. We intend to make it more meaningful, with officials testing delivery, and, at the same time, Ministers driving that delivery.

That will enhance accountability, and I encourage the party that brought forward the motion to ensure that its Minister attends accountability meetings, because that was not the experience in the previous Executive and it needs to be addressed. I am asking, in a very encouraging way, the parties, particularly the party that tabled the motion, to ensure that whatever Minister they have in office in the time ahead attends the accountability meetings, because accountability and transparency are very important.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Ms M Anderson: I will give way at the end if I have time. The approach that we will take to handling the key objectives will be to make sure that things are more preventative, and, where required, we will make positive interventions to make sure that we have outcomes. We fully intend to support the new Programme for Government with strong accountability and reporting mechanisms that constantly test delivery against targets and to put in place formal arrangements for early interventions and prevention measures to remedy underperformance. That is something that every Member is looking for. We should not tolerate underperformance when we can make a difference and when an intervention can bring about change that will demonstrate to people

that outcomes are delivering for those who matter the most: the people out there who want an effective, robust Programme for Government.

I remind everyone in the House that, as Gregory Campbell said, any Programme for Government is ultimately about one thing: the people. The vision that we have for a new Programme for Government is to support growth, and we need to do so economically, intellectually and socially, as Conor Murphy said, for everyone, both now and in the future.

That is why, when we consider the decisions and actions that we have seen from the Executive and Members over the course of the previous Assembly, it is important that we take account of the additional resources that we were able to put in place when we agreed the Budget before the election period.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give way?

Ms M Anderson: I will give way if I have time, and I believe that I will have time. I want to put this in context. We were being encouraged to try to rush through a Budget, but it was right that we did not do so, and it was right that we found additional revenue of £1.5 billion. Let us look at what we were able to do.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Ms M Anderson: We were able to provide additional resources in the region of £190 million for health, £154 million for education, £51 million for employment and learning, and £107 million for regional development, and, on top of that, a decision was taken at the first Executive meeting of the new session to freeze university tuition fees. As Members will know, we have cross-party consensus on how to address corporation tax; whatever about how long it will take and the discussion about that, we know that there is consensus to address it. Therefore, it is clear to all who are willing to listen and to see that the Executive are preparing to invest in our biggest asset: our people.

The return on our investment must be sustainable economic growth. That will come through raising education standards, which is a need that many Members referred to; upskilling our workforce, which, again, there is collective agreement about; and increasing our attractiveness to global investors and further

enhancing our reputation of innovation and excellence in research and development.

I thank the Members who brought forward the issue for debate. I will now give way to Dominic, since I told him that I would do so if I had time.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. She mentioned accountability. I think that junior Ministers also have to be accountable, and they have to be accountable for the accuracy of their statements. She mentioned the figure of £1.5 billion. However, the Minister of Finance and Personnel has told the House on several occasions that it has not been possible to include £1.5 billion in the Budget. In fact, only £600 million of that £1.5 billion has been realised, and I welcome that. However, as I said, we need to be accountable, and we need to be accountable for accuracy. So, I hope that the junior Minister will revise her figures.

Ms M Anderson: What I will say to you, Mr Bradley, is that, without doubt, £1.5 billion was identified. I did not say that it was allocated. Again, I do not know whether this is the dialogue of the deaf. If you listened to what I said, you would know that £1.5 billion was identified and that £800 million of that was allocated.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Ms M Anderson: A Budget review group has been tasked with identifying additional resources. However, we all know the position you took on the Budget, Mr Bradley.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Ms M Anderson: So, I am glad to hear that you are actually supporting it now. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank everyone who has taken the time to come here today, regardless of whether their facts and figures are accurate. I appreciate that. I listened very intently to what the junior Minister said. She said — I think that this is the correct phraseology, but I am sure that she will correct me if it is not — that we do not need “a rapidly produced Programme for Government”. I have to say that the last thing that I would call this is a rapid process, but that is probably the best thing that you could say about it.

Throughout the debate, I heard more ideas and direction from Members of all parties about what should be inputted into this than the Minister provided us with. My colleague Dominic Bradley — go raibh maith agat, a Dhominic, as ucht an rún a mholadh — referred to the need to maximise every benefit. My colleague referred to an extra 27,000 people from the construction industry, and my other colleague referred to the extra 29,000 people who are unemployed. We have to be extremely conscious of those figures. There are people who have to choose between heating and eating. That is a fact, as everyone in the House knows from speaking to people in their constituency offices. Whatever about the politics of it, ideas need to come forward, and we need to have a definite Programme for Government that benefits people.

My colleague referred to the issues of the economy, tourism and agrifood. I thought that the Minister, given her Department's brief, would have responded to Mr Elliott's thoughts about the Barroso report and to thoughts about research and development in the EU. Clearly, an emerging theme throughout the debate was the need to address not only skills acquisition but the fact that skills are being lost through redundancies, layoffs and unemployment across our society. That issue certainly needs to be addressed.

Aside from the bit of banter back and forth, Mr Humphrey talked about focusing on the economy, employment, and the requirement for joined-up government between all the parties, which is another theme that I will come to in a moment. Mr McKay referred to the need to protect the vulnerable against cuts. Mr Lyttle also touched on the issue of skills acquisition — indeed, I referred to the loss of skills — and he also mentioned the issues of older people and people in deprivation. He also referred to the green new deal, which is a key area that has come up in the debate.

Mr Hamilton said that we do not have Departments in silos. The same theme was repeated by junior Minister Anderson. Well, if we do not have Departments in silos, why do the likes of the all-party working group on construction and the construction industry tell us that the picture that they get is that Departments work in silos and do not work cross-departmentally in the community's interests? That may well be going on behind closed doors by a few civil servants who are

huddled in a room somewhere. However, the message is certainly not getting out to society or, indeed, to people who are being crippled economically at present. Therefore, a big job needs to be done despite what the junior Minister says.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he accept that what people out there want at present is a kick-start to the local economy, particularly in construction? There is gross annoyance that capital projects are not being started. That is currently people's priority.

Mr McGlone: Indeed, I thank the Minister — I mean, the Member — for his intervention. You will forgive me for that wee Freudian slip, Joe.

Mr Humphrey: *[Interruption.]*

Mr McGlone: You picked up on it quickly, William. I thank Mr Byrne for his intervention. Yes; that is a huge issue. Members from other parties who attended that all-party working group are in the Chamber: Mr McElduff, for example. That issue is raised time and again by small businesses and by the construction industry and professionals associated with it. Decisions need to be got out the door pronto. Whatever money is available to spend on capital schemes must be spent now in order to support and sustain the industry. Much has been made of sustainability by the junior Minister. That is one practical example of how that could be done.

Conor Murphy referred to the requirement to protect jobs and the economy and to put the people first. Indeed, he referred to my party putting the people first. I would like to think that through its productive role in the Assembly and the Executive, it does exactly that.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I am sure that, like me, he watched last night's programme on John Hume and the formation of the SDLP. I am sure that he will agree that our party stands on a very proud history and record of putting the people first.

Mr McGlone: Yes, indeed. I thank the Member for reminding me of our party's proud history in Derry through John Hume. We did not make false promises about a rail link to Derry. We did not make false promises that the road network would be enhanced. Our political party did not stick up posters around the city making all of those promises. We deliver on our promises. Perhaps the problem was that a senior civil

servant in the Department was drafting another letter that was a wee bit misleading.

Mr McElduff: I apologise to the Member for being unable to watch that programme because I was watching 'The Frontline' on RTÉ, which profiled Martin McGuinness's chances of winning the Irish presidential election.

Mr McGlone: We could always argue the merits or demerits of both figures and their positive contribution to the city of Derry —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We must return to the subject of the debate.

Mr McGlone: We are getting slightly distracted. I take that point, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, but some of your party colleagues added to the diversion.

Mr Spratt referred to the need to work together collectively and the need for investment in a quality public transport system. John McCallister referred to the lack of direction on the Programme for Government and to the fact that people were not agreed. I have to say that that is the message that comes from people outside the Building: that the Assembly must get its act together, work more collectively and present an image of working in the interests of the entire community.

Mr Allister: The Member makes some valid points. Indeed, throughout the debate, Members from his party and, indeed, the Ulster Unionists made valid criticisms of the absence of a Programme for Government and of how they are treated in the Executive. Is there not a certain compelling logic to the road down which they are headed, which is that they should grasp the nettle and become an opposition in the House? Some people think that one person can have an effect. How much more effect could a third of the House have in opposition? Would that not make for better government, rather than being part of a dysfunctional, failing Executive of which the absence of a Programme for Government is but a symptom?

12.30 pm

Mr McGlone: It is worthwhile having a discussion on that. I do not think I will be joining Mr Allister in his party of one just at the moment. We have quite a bit of work to do on the shared future before we arrive at that point.

Mr McCallister: See how the leadership goes. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McGlone: Maybe you will join us then, Jim? I thank him for his intervention.

A very valid point was made by Mr McCallister, who said that there is no structure or strategy on cross-cutting issues, which is a big issue. I am glad to hear, and I hope the Minister is starting to point up, that we are going to see Departments working on a cross-cutting basis. I hope that senior civil servants are huddled somewhere in rooms, irrespective of where those rooms are, and are beginning to get together instead of maintaining themselves in silos and protecting the interests of their Departments. This is about something much bigger than that: the interests of the community.

Mr Eastwood referred to the spending cuts and the requirements for Derry and for public transport and the rail network there. I highlighted commitments and promises that were made by previous incumbents of the relevant ministerial seat that simply have not been delivered.

Mr Trevor Clarke said that he had no problem with the sentiments of the motion but then went on to disagree considerably with some of the principles of the motion. But then, I know Trevor. *[Laughter.]*

I again thank Mrs Cochrane for her comments on obstacles to the cost of living and the economically inactive in society. Welfare reform will have a major effect on that, and many people are troubled and deeply concerned about that.

Basil McCrea referred to issues and delays in Departments. My colleague Dolores Kelly, as I pointed out, referred to the construction industry.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr McGlone: Molaim an rún agus gabhaim buíochas le achan duine as ucht a dtacaíochta. I thank everyone who spoke in support of the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that good practice in governance is to base a Budget on an up-to-

date Programme for Government so that the policy initiatives can inform financial planning; notes that it is now over six months since the Assembly voted on the Executive's Budget 2011-15; further notes the significant economic change in this region since the 2008-2011 Programme for Government was published; and calls on the Executive to publish for consultation a new draft Programme for Government which adequately addresses the economic challenges in the coming years.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I refer you to Standing Order 17(5), which states:

"The Speaker shall determine the order of speaking and the number of speakers in any debate having due regard to the balance of opinion on the matter".

Will you consult the Speaker to see whether there is any way to enable all those who wish to take part in a debate in the House to do so? I realise that there are issues that you have to take into consideration and that a balance has to be struck, but perhaps you will bring that up.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am happy to do that.

The Business Committee has agreed to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business will be Question Time.

The sitting was suspended at 12.33 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Speaker: Order. We come to Question Time. First, we have questions to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). Mr Allister, do you want to make a point of order?

Mr Allister: Yes, thank you, Mr Speaker. I understand that you will shortly advise the Assembly that question 3, which stands in my name, has been transferred to the Department of Finance and Personnel. Mr Speaker, I direct you to the content of question 3: it is Department-specific and relates precisely to OFMDFM, asking why that office thinks that it needs eight special advisers. Why, in those circumstances, is such a question being diverted to a different Department, particularly when one examines the rules and can find no authority for that? Indeed, I have taken the trouble of consulting the Business Office —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has made his point. That is not a matter for the Speaker; it concerns the two Departments. As Speaker, I have absolutely no role in how questions are transferred. As I said, that is a matter solely and absolutely for the Departments concerned, and we should now move into Question Time.

Mr Allister: Further to that point of order —

Mr Speaker: No, I am not taking any further points of order. We really need to move on to Question Time.

Parades Commission

1. **Ms Ritchie** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their meeting with the Parades Commission on 28 June 2011. (AQO 339/11-15)

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): As we advised the Sinn Féin Member for North Antrim on 19 July in a written response to his question, we discussed with the chairman and chief

executive of the Parades Commission the then upcoming marching season, and we expressed our shared hopes for a calm summer. We also reiterated our commitment to a new and improved framework for dealing with parades, as outlined in the Hillsborough Castle Agreement.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the First Minister for his answer. However, given the failure to resolve the parading issue post-Hillsborough, is it now parked? Will he also give an assurance that the existence and independence of the Parades Commission will be protected, maintained and enhanced?

Mr P Robinson: I regret that we have not yet been able to proceed with the parades legislation. We believe that it provides a much better structure and format for taking forward the issue of parades. Some Members went out of their way to dissuade others from supporting that. The Member for North Antrim is the poster boy of the Parades Commission. His thumbprint is on every bad decision that the Parades Commission takes, because he wants it to remain in place rather than having the alternative. However, the independence of the body itself is not a matter for the deputy First Minister and me. Its members are, of course, appointed by the Secretary of State.

Mr Storey: In many regards, the First Minister has answered the question that I wanted to pose to him. Does he agree that the Parades Commission has failed miserably, in places such as Rasharkin in my constituency and in other places such as Ardoyne and the Garvaghy Road, in its inability to find a fair and equitable way of resolution? That underlines the important issue of ensuring that —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member come to his question?

Mr Storey: — as soon as the Parades Commission can be decommissioned and put into storage and out of the way, the better for Northern Ireland and for parades.

Mr P Robinson: Central to the issue is that a parade must take place in a respectful manner and be respected by the whole community. If we are to make real advances, greater understanding and tolerance of those matters will be required. We started to look at what the alternatives might be because there was a widespread view in at least one section of the community that the Parades Commission had

become part of the problem rather than the solution.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the First Minister clarify whether the flags protocol group will meet in the coming months to discuss the issue of contentious flags during the parading season?

Mr P Robinson: We still have a monitoring process for the flags issue. The answer is yes, although we will probably want to encompass how we move forward on that issue under the cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) proposals. In 2005, a protocol was set down about the number of flags, where those flags are flown and the type of flags that are flown. That was revised in 2009, and we will want to look at it further. There have been issues relating to flags over the past number of months. There are sensitivities in this area, and we need to be very careful that we have respect for the community that has to pass through areas. We also have to ensure that flags involve no symbolism of paramilitary groups.

Mr Elliott: Given that republicans seem to want to oppose a number of parades continually, does the Minister accept that it is important that whatever process is put in place is much simpler for those applying to have a parade?

Mr P Robinson: It needs to be a much more open process than is the case at present. Groups are often left unaware of some of the reasons behind a decision. That was part of the thinking behind the new processes that the deputy First Minister and I recommended. Indeed, it allowed for the cross-examination of some of the evidence that might be supplied even by the police. It is not only a simplification but a much more open and fair process that is required.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration: Working Group

2. **Mr Newton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many times the cross-party working group on cohesion, sharing and integration has met. (AQO 340/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: As Members will know, in the days following the Assembly election, the five main political parties each agreed to appoint representatives to a cross-party working group to seek consensus on issues to enable the

publication of a programme for cohesion, sharing and integration. Officials informed me that the final party nominee was received only last week. That means that we are only now in a position to call a meeting of the working group, which makes the agreed timeline for the CSI strategy very challenging.

Consultation on the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration has been completed. We are considering the analyses of the many responses received, one prepared by an independent consultant and another by our own officials. Now that party nominations have been confirmed, we are seeking to convene a meeting at the earliest opportunity, which we expect to be next week.

Mr Newton: I thank the First Minister for his answer. Does he agree that, in order for a CSI strategy to be meaningful, transparent and successful, it is absolutely necessary that all parties agree to work constructively towards the successful outcome of agreeing and implementing the strategy?

Mr P Robinson: The Member is absolutely right. It seems contradictory to bring forward a strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration and then bicker about it in the Assembly. That is why the deputy First Minister and I responded very warmly to the suggestion by the other parties in the Executive that the party leaders would meet and discuss these matters and that we should set up a working group. It is the right *modus operandi* to bring the whole of the Executive and the Assembly along with this process.

Mr Byrne: Have the CSI proposals been considered in the North/South context? Given the 10 years of commemorations ahead, is it important that the CSI strategy includes some of the aspects that are shared right across the island?

Mr P Robinson: It has not been. This is obviously a strategy for Northern Ireland. We have built a very good relationship with the Irish Republic. We are always willing to learn lessons from other parts of the world. If there are lessons to be learned, we are happy to learn them. The Executive obviously have the final say on the strategy and will want to bring it to the Assembly for endorsement at some stage. Within the next very short while, perhaps a matter of a week, we expect not only to have provided the Committee with the documentation

that we promised it but to have put that into the public arena.

Mr McCallister: Will the First Minister confirm that it was not the Ulster Unionist Party that has held the process back? I was the nominee from our party at Stormont Castle on 13 May, and that was reconfirmed on 21 June in his office in this Building.

Mr P Robinson: I do not think it is helpful for us to get into a blame game around holding it back. Officials informed me that that they received the final nominee from parties only in the past few days. We want to move forward on a constructive basis. I do not think we will do that by trying to work out who was to blame through a process of elimination or inclusion.

Mr McLaughlin: Reference was made earlier to centenary commemorations. There is a decade of significant commemorations coming up: the signing of the covenant; the battle of the Boyne; and the 1916 rising. That presents a unique opportunity to examine —

Mr Speaker: Order. I know that supplementary questions can grow legs, but they should be brief.

Mr McLaughlin: Does the First Minister recognise the opportunity to advance the CSI strategy by examining our disputed or shared history?

Mr P Robinson: The deputy First Minister and I, along with the Acting deputy First Minister — or whatever the title ends up being — discussed commemorations just yesterday. We recognise that they are important and sensitive, and we want to ensure that they are held in a way that will not be divisive to our community. The Member is right that there is a list of commemorations, some more contentious than others. That list includes the centenary of the sinking of the Titanic.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been transferred, and question 11 will get a written response.

OFMDFM: Equality Scheme

4. **Ms Gildernew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they will bring forward their Department's equality scheme.

(AQO 342/11-15)

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

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I am pleased to say that OFMDFM's equality scheme will be issued for a three-month public consultation this week. The scheme has also been formally issued to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI). The scheme is our commitment to ensuring that promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations is at the heart of our policy-making. It follows closely the model scheme produced by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the direction given in the ECNI's document 'Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998: A Guide for Public Authorities'.

Alongside the equality scheme, we are publishing our audit of inequalities and an associated action plan, with which we hope to proactively tackle all areas of inequality. In line with the Equality Commission's guidance, the audit and action plan have shifted the emphasis of the scheme to doing active good rather than simply doing no harm. We look forward to engaging with all sections of our society on the scheme during our consultation.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh míle maith agat. I welcome the answer and think the fact that we have moved towards active good will have more of an equality impact on our society. However, given that OFMDFM has the lead role and that many other Departments look to it for leadership in this, why did it take so long for the Department to issue its new equality scheme?

Mr Bell: I appreciate the words and the need to move towards looking at something that is proactively good as opposed to simply doing no harm. As I think the Member will understand, it is a complex matter, and this Department's strategic responsibility for working on both equality and good relations meant that we had to take care to ensure that the relationship between equality and good relations, namely between section 75(1) and section 75(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, has been reflected properly in the scheme. Moreover, as we are all aware, the Assembly recess period was a major factor contributing to the delay in publishing our Department's equality scheme.

2.15 pm

Mr Campbell: The junior Minister will be aware, as many others are, that some of the organisations that come under the aegis of the First Minister and deputy First Minister — for

example, the Equality Commission and other groups within the Civil Service — themselves have an imbalance. It is not a perception of an imbalance but an actual imbalance in the under-representation of the Protestant community. Can he ensure that the consultation process, when it is completed, will address that fundamental under-representation, which has existed for many years?

Mr Bell: The honourable Member makes his point very well. We are concerned. Equality has to be a two-way process. That applies equally when representatives of the Protestant community are disenfranchised or treated unequally in the process as it exists. The equality legislation exists to serve that two-way process. I encourage anybody in any organisation in the Protestant community and other communities who feels that there is under-representation and unfairness to take that through the equality legislation. It applies as much to them as to anybody else.

There are other issues. For example, one of the major concerns that I have is the educational under-representation and underachievement of working-class Protestant boys, who are the most vulnerable. That was emphasised in a recent report by Dr Peter Shirlow of Queen's University. It is working-class Protestant boys who are educationally underachieving. The follow-on is that they will not get the requisite education or build the required skill sets to achieve and play their full role in the professions. All areas and factors that contribute, not least the under-representation and underachievement of Protestant working-class boys, have to be factored into any consideration of equality.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the junior Minister for highlighting the underachievement of Protestant working-class boys. I believe that it has been an issue for around 10 years. Does the Minister have any sense of a cost/benefit analysis of his Department's work on equality and good relations?

Mr Bell: Yes, indeed, it has been around. I was working with my Strangford colleague's predecessor and others over the past number of years on that issue. Inequality is why we brought about the social protection fund and the social investment fund. Therefore, the groups and organisations that are experiencing difficulties, particularly in a time of recession, can access a

fund that will help by giving them not a handout but a hand up.

Mrs McKeivitt: In future, will full equality impact assessments be carried out on major Executive decisions? Such assessments failed to occur in the recent Budget process.

Mr Bell: I am not sure that the premise of the Member's statement is correct. When it is examined in the cold light of reality — I appreciate that the Member is a new Member and may not fully understand the process that was undertaken at the time — I do not think it will stand up to scrutiny.

Let me tell you of some of the issues regarding inequality to inform the Member better. We published an audit of inequalities and an action plan that was designed so that we could target where we could make a significant difference. It is not about point scoring; it is about making a significant difference to the lives of people. Our audit of inequalities is focused on high-level social and economic trends across Northern Ireland. In our action plan, we related those to specific policies and strategies that are being implemented or are about to be implemented to show what actions we are taking and what actions we will take to improve the outcomes for section 75 groups.

We have encompassed policies that deal with the duty to ensure equality of opportunity and the good relations duty. In conducting the audit and preparing our action plan, we followed a seven-step approach that identified and reviewed high-level economic and social trends and considered the long-term implications of those trends on growing inequalities. In considering OFMDFM's functions, we considered the potential of the Department to positively influence those trends in order to determine whether our activities can affect negative consequences. We agreed together how to measure the outcomes, but just because we cannot measure something totally does not mean that we cannot take action on it. It is about measuring changes in inequalities, identifying improved data collection, quantifying the scale of the inequality and offering a suggested timescale over which significant change may be expected to occur.

Programme for Government: Poverty

5. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what new measures to address poverty they intend to bring forward in the forthcoming Programme for Government.
(AQO 343/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: In developing our new Programme for Government, we are intent on continuing the work that we have completed to date in the challenge to eradicate poverty. We intend to pursue that on several fronts. The social investment fund, which was agreed in March 2011, is aimed at reducing poverty and unemployment. The social protection fund will operate as a means of tackling disadvantage and protecting the most vulnerable. Through those funds, £100 million has been secured, despite the financial constraints that were imposed as a result of the budgetary settlement for projects across the 2011-15 period.

The settlement allocated an additional £12 million towards the provision of support for the delivery of a new childcare strategy. We are also concerned about rising energy costs. It is our intention to develop proposals to alleviate hardship through use of the social protection fund. Almost 7,000 social and affordable homes were provided during the life of the previous Assembly. Around 15,000 homes benefited from the warm homes scheme, and over £48 million was provided through capital and revenue projects to support vulnerable and disadvantaged communities. Those activities made a lasting and fundamental difference to the lives of thousands of people.

We are committed to identifying the key challenges that keep individuals, families and communities in poverty and to tackling those directly through strategically targeted interventions that are designed to bring about tangible reductions and solutions. Those are among the key issues that we want to address. In drafting a new Programme for Government, our priorities are being developed in a way that will most effectively enable actions that will bring about long-term benefits to individuals and society alike.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the First Minister for his detailed response. However, given the increase in family and child poverty in all our constituencies, does he agree that we should set out a course and carry out a comprehensive

study of the effects of child poverty across Northern Ireland?

Mr P Robinson: There is an Executive subgroup that is specifically charged with looking at those issues. I hope that all Ministers will take those meetings seriously and attend them and make a positive contribution. Departments will have individual responsibilities for various areas of work that impact on child poverty. It will be up to each Minister to determine the type of review or study that they will carry out for their area of responsibility.

Mr Spratt: Does the First Minister agree that the best way to address child and family poverty is to get parents back into work? Therefore, is it not important that providing new opportunities and growing the economy should remain the key priority for government?

Mr P Robinson: Yes, absolutely. When we talk about child poverty, we are really talking about the poverty of the parents. That, to a large extent, comes down to whether people have a worthwhile job at a fair and decent wage. The onus obviously falls on government to continue its work to grow the economy. That is what we have done, and it is why, in the previous Programme for Government, the growth of our economy was front and centre. I hope and expect that that will continue to be the case.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The First Minister has mentioned some measures to alleviate poverty. However, he has not mentioned the income disregard scheme. Can he give us an update on that scheme, as it was he and the deputy First Minister who originally brought it to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister?

Mr P Robinson: We will continue to consider a move forward with those issues. Of course, it is not just one issue; a series of factors have an impact on the child poverty figures. We have to face up to the fact that the greater the recession we face, the higher the levels of child and family poverty. That makes it more incumbent not just on the deputy First Minister and me but on all Ministers to ensure that we bring forward proposals that can alleviate and reduce those levels.

Child Abuse

6. **Mr McKay** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the Executive will make recommendations on the form of the inquiry into historical institutional child abuse.
(AQO 344/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: At their meeting on 7 July, the Executive discussed the interdepartmental task force recommendations and tasked junior Ministers to engage with victims and survivors over the summer months to seek their views on those recommendations. Since the Executive meeting, junior Ministers have met five victims' and survivors' groups. Ministers also met officials responsible for managing historical abuse inquiries in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. The information gathered will inform a report that will be submitted to the Executive before they make their final decision in the autumn on the nature of an inquiry.

Mr McKay: I thank the First Minister for his answer. I appreciate that this is a sensitive issue. However, does the First Minister recognise the concerns that many of those who suffered abuse have about the issue of compellability? Will the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister ensure that any inquiry has statutory powers?

Mr P Robinson: That is something on which the Executive have to decide. The Member is probably aware that we have received a report from the task force, which recommends a non-statutory inquiry. However, during the meetings with victims' groups, victims expressed a view that led us towards believing that they wanted a statutory inquiry. I am not sure whether all victims are aware of the pros and cons of a statutory inquiry, and, of course, there is the possibility of our looking at a proposition that might have some elements on a statutory basis and some not. I point out to the Member and, through the Assembly, to victims that, if we take the statutory route, the only statutory provision that is available presently would limit the period of an inquiry to between 1973 and 1989. I do not think that that would assist victims. If we, therefore, have to bring forward new legislation, it could be 18 months or two years before we could proceed.

Mr McDevitt: I acknowledge the work that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have done on the issue. I invite the First Minister to acknowledge to the House that it is about

getting it right rather than getting it quickly and that, ultimately, the needs of survivors will be met properly, albeit over a longer time, only if we have a fully independent, statutorily based inquiry.

Mr Speaker: I urge the Member to come to a question.

Mr P Robinson: I acknowledge that it is important that we get it right. Of course, every party will have its own views, and not all victims agree on what the process should be. If we have a statutory inquiry, it is important that the statutory element does not increase the pain that victims have already gone through, and, in many cases, if they have to give evidence and be cross-examined, that may well do it. You cannot have a statutory inquiry where the only person obliged to give evidence and be cross-examined is the accused.

Ministerial Subcommittee on Children and Young People

7. **Mrs Lewis** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work of the ministerial subgroup on children and young people. (AQO 345/11-15)

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

Mr Bell: The membership of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people, chaired by junior Minister Anderson and me, includes all Ministers. The subcommittee was established with the ultimate aim of improving the lives of our children and young people.

There has been a lot of talk about government not being joined up and of Departments working in silos, so we have five groups. The safeguarding group is led by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

The Department for Employment and Learning leads on the major issue of young people who are not in education, employment or training. The Department of Education leads on special educational needs and early years education, while the Department of Justice takes the lead in dealing with vulnerable young people.

2.30 pm

All the subgroups include senior officials from the relevant Departments, and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is represented on each subgroup. The six objectives contained in the 10-year children and young people's strategy are: keeping our young people healthy; looking at their economic and environmental well-being; looking at how they can enjoy learning and achieving; looking at how they can contribute positively; looking at how they can live safely; and looking at how they can live in a society that respects their rights. We aim to place all those objectives at the heart of the Government's agenda.

Shortly, we will convene another meeting of the ministerial subcommittee to discuss how we progress work to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people here in line with our joint commitments on the overarching 10-year strategy for children and young people and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. A key focus of that discussion will be on how we can best integrate and streamline efforts across all our Departments to ensure the maximum impact on the priority issues for children and young people.

Justice

Mr Speaker: Questions 2 and 9 have been withdrawn.

Office of the Police Ombudsman

1. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the report by the Committee on the Administration of Justice on its review of the Office of the Police Ombudsman. (AQO 352/11-15)

4. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Justice to outline any communication between his private office, his Department and the Office of the Police Ombudsman in relation to a reduction in the level of independence of the Office of the Police Ombudsman. (AQO 355/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 1 and 4 together. The Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) report that was published on 16 June 2011 covers a wide range of issues, some of which pre-date devolution

and are not for me to judge. The report also addresses issues that are covered by Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) in respect of historical cases. The CJINI report had the benefit of having had access to the relevant people and papers, and I have already set out my acceptance of its findings. The CAJ report also helpfully highlights the centrality of independence to the working of the office and the importance of perception regarding oversight. Those issues will be addressed in the discussion paper that I will produce in the autumn.

On the question of interaction with the ombudsman about the lowering of independence, I can confirm that I met the ombudsman to discuss the McCusker and CJINI reports, and I plan to meet him in early October to discuss implementation plans. My Department has already begun to provide support to the Office of the Police Ombudsman in that process and will continue to do so.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. The CAJ report reveals that the person who chaired the interview panel that recommended Al Hutchinson for appointment is now the permanent secretary in the Department of Justice. Can the Minister assure the Assembly that his failure so far to recommend publicly that Al Hutchinson should step down is not tainted or jaundiced by advice from his permanent secretary, who, as I said, chaired the panel for the job? Further to that, will he underline that by joining me and a growing number of parties from this community —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should come to his question.

Mr McKay: — in calling on Mr Hutchinson to leave his office without further delay?

Mr Ford: I assure the Member and the entire House that, on 12 April last year, I made it clear to the staff of the Department of Justice that they now worked for the Department of Justice. That was the basis on which we operated. I have had no reason to doubt that that is the view of every senior official and junior official in the Department since that time. As for calling for people to resign, I refer the Member to the specific position in law: the role of appointing the ombudsman and, potentially, of calling on the ombudsman to resign is a role for the First

Minister and the deputy First Minister acting jointly, and for nobody else.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Does the Minister now accept that the independence of the ombudsman's office has been lowered to such an extent that the current ombudsman no longer enjoys the confidence of Sinn Féin, the SDLP and many families who were affected by the conflict?

Mr Ford: It is clear from the reports that have been published that there are concerns about the independence of the ombudsman's office. However, I refer the Member to what I said yesterday in debate: it is absolutely clear that the vast majority of the work that is being done by the ombudsman's office on current cases is proceeding well and is being received well by those who refer cases and those who receive reports back. The issue of dealing with historical matters has added complication to the work of the ombudsman's office, as he has acknowledged. It is clear that we require a functioning ombudsman's office to deal with current cases. The ombudsman has indicated his willingness to vacate the office as soon as a replacement is appointed.

Mr Craig: Will the Minister agree that the original role of the ombudsman's office, which he outlined, was to investigate current police cases where complaints are made and that, in that role, the ombudsman's office has done what anyone would describe as a reasonable job over that period? Does he also agree that changing its remit to include the investigation of Historical Enquiries Team cases has led to huge problems in the office?

Mr Ford: I agree with the Member on what the original perception may have been. The reality is that we are required to have an appropriate article 2 compliant mechanism in place for dealing with historical issues. The ombudsman's office currently provides that through the historical work that it does, and, at the moment, no alternative mechanism is in place. A number of other people, including Members but not the ombudsman, have a duty to find an alternative mechanism that might help this society as a whole to resolve all the outstanding issues of the past.

Mr McDevitt: The Minister must surely accept that, at this stage in the day, the current ombudsman's remaining in office is an obstacle

to the renewal of that office. Does he, as Minister of Justice, have confidence in Mr Al Hutchinson to be able to uphold the duties of the Office of the Police Ombudsman?

Mr Ford: No, I do not accept that the ombudsman's remaining in office at this stage is an obstacle. As I made clear in the debate yesterday afternoon, in the circumstances where the two other senior staff in the office are both acting up because the chief executive has resigned and the senior director of investigations is on long-term sick leave, it is clear that there will be major problems, which will be compounded by the issue of the ombudsman's being a corporation sole if he does not remain in post. I have discussed with him the work that has to be done to ensure that the structures and procedures are changed to make sure that there is full confidence in all the work of the office, including the historical work. That is the task that he has committed himself to doing in his remaining time in office, while others have the responsibility for appointing a replacement.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister confirm that the terms of reference for the CJI investigation this time were completely different to those for the previous CJI investigation and that it is therefore erroneous for people to draw conclusions that the ombudsman dealt well with the past previously but now does not? Does the Member agree that that question is still open and that we have to find a better way of dealing with it?

Mr Ford: I cannot confirm what the terms of reference for the work of CJINI were on this occasion, because it was the ombudsman himself who requested Dr Maguire to conduct the investigation that was published and given to me during the summer. It has been highlighted that there are major problems around how this society deals with the past, and it is clear that, at the moment, we have an imperfect mechanism. The institutions that deal with the past consist of the Police Service's Historical Enquiries Team, the historical work of the ombudsman and some legacy inquests. Therefore, the issue goes much wider than the ombudsman's office, and, frankly, this House and others have failed to address it.

Peace Lines: Belfast

3. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Justice to outline any plans he has to remove, change or adjust peace lines in the greater Belfast area.
(AQO 354/11-15)

Mr Ford: Recently, I announced two positive developments with regard to security barriers in north Belfast that have been brought about through engagement with local communities and multi-agency work. On 16 September, I opened a peace gate in the security fence at Alexandra Park, off the Limestone Road. That wall has divided the park since 1994. Agreement to open that new gate during the day follows much good work by the Alexandra Park steering group, which has driven the regeneration of the park as a shared space for all. I congratulate and thank the members of the steering group, statutory bodies, the community on either side and Groundwork NI for their work on that.

I also announced that we would work towards daytime opening of the security barrier at the junction of Newington Street and the Limestone Road. Again, the catalyst for change has come from the community, with co-operation from a range of agencies. My Department, in conjunction with community representatives and other agencies, is looking at other areas where positive change is possible. I am clear that community consent remains the key driver for change, and I recognise the work already done at interfaces by community groups to bring about the right conditions for change. However, there remain areas, such as inner east Belfast, where agreement for positive change does not yet exist.

Following the riots in east Belfast in June and in support of the review being carried out on behalf of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I commissioned a review of the security infrastructure in the area. I also visited the area to speak with local clergy, and officials in my Department have held meetings with community representatives and local residents to hear their concerns at first hand. Some work has been done to improve or repair security fences on the lower Newtownards Road, Cluan Place and Bridge End. In addition, the Bryson Community Enterprises building, which is being used as a launching pad for attacks across the interface and for other antisocial behaviour, has been made more secure. I am considering what

further measures need to be taken to ensure public safety and to protect property.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his very detailed answer and, specifically, for his reference to the inner east Belfast area. His answer demonstrates that he is aware of the concerns among the community, and I imagine that those concerns are not in east Belfast alone but on both sides of specific interfaces. When the Minister finds those genuine concerns and where police records indicate that conflict is going on, what action will he take? Could I just add to that, Mr Speaker, that —

Mr Speaker: The Member should come to his question now.

Mr Newton: There is no value in members of another place putting forward motions to remove peace walls without consulting communities.

Mr Speaker: Order. I must insist.

Mr Ford: I have been encouraged from my left to pick one answer, so I will. There is every value in members of Belfast City Council demonstrating their willingness to provide a lead on dealing with the issue of peace walls in conjunction with local communities across the city.

Mr A Maginness: Hear, hear. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Copeland: The Minister must recognise that different types of peace walls exist in different sections of, primarily, Belfast for different reasons. It is vital that, when people raise those issues, they bear in mind the audience that they are addressing. For example, Mr Newton referred to the incident where comment was made and caused quite a lot of fear in one section of the community on one side of a wall in east Belfast and occasioned eight —

Mr Speaker: The Member should come to his question.

Mr Copeland: It occasioned eight people asking to be removed from their homes. So, will he undertake to ensure, in so far as he can, that, as he has said, the community is brought along at each stage of the process?

Mr Ford: We need to deal with the difference between what may be required as an operational response by the Police Service to particular incidents and the Department's duty to promote community safety to assist communities in

reaching the point where they no longer see walls as appropriate.

Mr A Maginness: I congratulate the Minister on his good work in relation to Alexandra Park and Newington Street. Furthermore, Belfast City Council is to be commended for its commitment to trying to deal with the problem in the city of Belfast. Does the Minister have any plans to systematically look at the walls that divide our citizens in the city of Belfast to see where more progress can be made on a programmatic basis?

Mr Ford: Mr Maginness raises a very significant point. The question is how far we are seeking to promote, on a wider basis, that which was carried through in the motion in Belfast City Council, to which he refers, or how far we are simply responding in an ad hoc way to wishes expressed by local communities. It seems to me that the significant movement in Alexandra Park and Newington Street in one week is an indication of the way that moods are changing. Certainly, where moods are changing, my Department will assist in any way it can. If that requires a more systematic examination of plans, I will be keen to hear from community representatives who wish to see movement forward.

2.45 pm

Mr Speaker: Members who wish to ask a supplementary question really need to continue to rise in their place.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. From all that has been said in the past few minutes, does the Minister agree that the template used in Alexandra Park was discussion between the residents on both sides, as well as with the statutory bodies, over some 18 months? I am not arguing that it should take that long in any other case, but, if the core, the template is that discussion and agreement is needed, that is the way to move forward.

Mr Ford: I agree with Mr Kelly. I suppose that he, like Mr Maginness, wants to celebrate the fact that they, too, were in the park on Friday morning. The key issue was community engagement, which we have also seen in other areas, such as Suffolk/Lenadoon, where it was action by local people who wished to see an end to barriers that led to their removal. The important issue is to ensure that all the relevant statutory bodies co-operate in that respect. I

speak only for the Department of Justice and its agencies, but I am committed to my staff and the agencies that work with us doing anything that we can where people wish those barriers to be removed.

Courts: Filming

5. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of Justice what action he intends to take to consult on the proposals to lift the court filming ban.

(AQO 356/11-15)

Mr Ford: Filming in courts in Northern Ireland is currently prohibited under the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 1945 and the Contempt of Court Act 1981. I have no plans to lift the ban on filming in courts in Northern Ireland. I have, however, asked my Department to watch how the plans recently announced in England and Wales, which will allow broadcasters to use footage of judgements handed down in certain courts, develop and to consider whether there are any lessons to be learned.

The potential impact of the presence of cameras in court proceedings on victims and witnesses would, of course, have to be weighed carefully when assessing the merits of lifting the ban, and their particular needs would need to be taken into account. It would also be essential to consider the views of the public, the judiciary and the legal profession through consultation.

Mrs Overend: Thank you for your answer, Minister. Do you agree that, if used just for sentencing, such proposals have the potential to drastically improve transparency and public confidence?

Mr Ford: From a position of limited knowledge, I am always reluctant to agree that something would “drastically” do anything in one way or the other. The interesting bit will be to see what happens in England and Wales. Examples of innovation are being trialled here: I understand that we are experiencing, for the first time, reporters commenting live from the courtroom via Twitter on a trial in a Northern Ireland court, although I am not quite sure how detailed arguments can be presented in 140 characters. However, the issue of whether justice is seen to be done merely by a judge being observed handing down the judgement does not necessarily convince me that that is the best way forward. I will consider evidence of what happens in England and Wales, and I will

ensure that we do that in a way that, most of all, fundamentally protects the needs of victims.

Mr Campbell: Before the Minister considers the installation of cameras in courts, would it not be a better use of his time to install cameras and implement closer scrutiny of those in custody, escaping from custody or whose health circumstances are such that they get out of custody?

Mr Ford: I am not aware of any issue that would relate to Mr Campbell’s latter point. If he was alluding to the quite proper recent review by the parole commissioners of the assessment of risk regarding one particular high-profile prisoner, Mr Brendan Lillis, he was querying the operation of a judicial process by the parole commissioners over which I have no control and on which I have no intention of commenting.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister accept in principle that some relaxation of the ban on filming in courts would be good, but that the priority has to be the protection and anonymity of victims and witnesses? Given that Northern Ireland has had show trials in the past, does he also accept that we would not want any theatre surrounding those sorts of trials?

Mr Ford: I agree that the key issue has to be to ensure the protection of victims and witnesses. If the trials to be conducted in England go ahead in accordance with what has been said by the Lord Chancellor, there may be some interesting evidence for us to consider. However, at this stage and in the absence of specific evidence as to why we should move, I do not regard lifting the ban as a priority.

Courts: Legal Aid Dispute

6. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the progress that has been made in resuming normal business in the Crown Court following the decision of solicitors who were involved in the legal aid dispute to return to work. (AQO 357/11-15)

Mr Ford: Following discussions between officials from the Courts and Tribunals Service and representatives of both branches of the legal profession during August, the withdrawal action ended on 19 August, and defence lawyers returned to work. With the ending of the withdrawal action, arrangements were made by the Courts and Tribunals Service to allow solicitors to attend court to go back on record

for their clients as quickly as possible, thereby ensuring that defendants receive the advice and assistance they require without further delay. Virtually all the solicitors who came off record have now returned to normal working at the rate set in the amendment rules determined by the Assembly. I am confident that the arrangements in place will enable the remaining solicitors to go back on record.

At the height of the withdrawal action, 538 defendants were unrepresented. Now, however, well over 90% of them are represented by solicitors on record. Solicitors have also been asked to provide the court with an assessment of the state of readiness of each case to assist the listing of court business. I welcome the action of solicitors in returning to normal work, and I welcome the action of the judiciary, who have done significant work to ensure early listings of cases where possible.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his answer and commend him for his firm handling of an issue that has been neglected for too long; indeed, it has been neglected by some who wish it to be neglected much longer. Will the Minister tell the Assembly what the estimated annual savings will be as a result of his actions on Crown Court fees and whether he will be seeking additional savings from other areas of the legal aid budget?

Mr B McCrea: Well read. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Minister to speak.

Mr Ford: I am sure, Mr Speaker, that those Members who supported the work done to reform the Crown Court costs earlier in the year will welcome the fact that it is expected to save £18.3 million annually. However, issues remain to be addressed in the overall budget available for legal aid, which is still projected to be over budget on current spending patterns. Therefore, further work is needed.

The access to justice review that I announced last week will give further scope for making savings in other areas. Two further proposals will go to the Committee in the near future, which will represent a further potential saving of £1.7 million. It is clear that significantly more work has still to be done to reform legal aid costs in Northern Ireland.

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

an fhreagra sin. With regard to the proposal and the new regime, the Minister stated previously that there will be a review mechanism. Will he give us the timeline for when he thinks that that review mechanism will take place?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr McCartney for his question. During the discussions with the two branches of the profession, the Department, through the Courts and Tribunals Service, offered an early review of the operation of the new arrangements. We were prepared to offer it earlier than the two years that will be standard, potentially after something like six months. My understanding of the last bit of negotiation when I was on leave on 19 August was that neither branch of the profession was pressing for an early review. Therefore, I have indicated at this stage that we will keep the matter under consideration. It may be that the review will be early, or it may go the full two years. To some extent, it will depend on representations made to the Department. However, the position of the lawyers changed during those discussions.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the recommencement of court activity. Does the Minister agree that the public deserve not only a recommencement of normal activity but justice being delivered in a timely, fair and efficient manner and that there is considerable room for further improvement so that the experience of the public in the court system is greatly improved?

Mr Ford: Yes, Mr Speaker, I agree with Mr Beggs about the need for timely, fair and efficient operations of the courts. That has been one of my priorities since I became Minister. I believe that we have seen some significant progress over the past year or so, particularly in the work done between the Police Service and the Public Prosecution Service in ensuring proper and speedy preparation of files. I also welcome the fact that members of the judiciary have initiatives to manage court timetables much more efficiently and ensure that cases are presented in an orderly way and dealt with speedily. However, despite all that, Northern Ireland is much slower in court cases than other neighbouring jurisdictions, and I am keen to do what I can to speed things up. It affects the cost of legal aid and, due to the costs incurred in managing remand prisoners, the cost of the Prison Service. It is clear that there is much more to be done. However, I welcome the fact that a number of people have worked together

constructively to ensure that we have, at least, started that process.

Mr Weir: Although the Minister has referred to the fact that there are early listings in a number of the cases held up by the dispute, when will any backlog that may have built up be cleared, and when can we be confident that we will be back to business as usual?

Mr Ford: I am afraid that predicting the exact timing of court cases is beyond me. Some of the other initiatives under way to speed up matters, which I just mentioned to Mr Beggs, will ensure that we make progress on getting back to normal more quickly than we might otherwise have done. However, there will be a period of weeks in which there will still be issues around solicitors ensuring that they get their cases ready to proceed to court. There will be no lacking on the part of the Courts and Tribunals Service or, I believe, the judiciary, in assisting that process to happen.

Drivers: Insurance Premiums

7. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister of Justice what steps his Department is taking to reduce insurance premiums for drivers.

(AQO 358/11-15)

Mr Ford: A number of factors impact on the level of insurance premiums for drivers. I recognise that there are concerns that the way in which road traffic accident claims are handled in this jurisdiction contributes to the reported higher costs. I met the Consumer Council in September last year to discuss the issue, and, subsequently, my Department provided the council with statistical information to assist in its consideration of the matter. The Member may also be aware that the Office of Fair Trading announced recently that it is examining reports that private motor insurance costs across the UK are rising. As part of that work, the office will examine whether premiums are higher in this jurisdiction and, if so, it will examine the reasons why. I do not want to preempt the Office of Fair Trading findings, which are expected in December, but my officials will continue to support the examination.

As Members will know, other stakeholders in the justice system may also have to consider the findings of the Office of Fair Trading report. My Department will continue to work with everyone in the justice system to consider, and seek to

address, any concerns raised by the Office of Fair Trading.

Mr Wells: As the Minister knows, insurance claims in Northern Ireland are on average 80% higher than those in the rest of the United Kingdom. That is placing an impossible burden on families, particularly in rural areas, and on young drivers. Will the Minister's Department look at some way in which insurance claim cases can be heard by a lower court, as happens in the rest of the United Kingdom, in order to reduce the cost of processing those claims?

Mr Ford: Mr Wells makes a fair point about how we process claims. I am not sure whether moving things to a lower court would necessarily result in that big a saving in the level of damages awarded. There would, of course, be the option to take matters out of courts entirely, as is the case with our neighbours in the Republic. I accept Mr Wells's point that there are concerns about the way in which the system operates, particularly around personal injuries, the level of compensation and the way in which that then reflects on premiums paid. I am not sure that it is going to be easy to solve, but we are prepared to look at the options for my Department.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer, in which he touched on my question. What steps is he taking to ensure that insurance claims, the level of claims and the payouts are decided by groups that are representative of wider society, rather than being left with the legal profession? He hinted that the Irish have a different way of doing things.

Mr Ford: I trust that my constituency colleague is not encouraging me to disagree with the judiciary and the way it carries out its current duties. Some years ago, the system was changed and rather than compensation claims being judged in front of juries and juries having a say in the amounts paid, they were brought to the judiciary. At that time, it was expected that that would reduce costs, but, in fact, it made no significant difference. There are, therefore, issues about the way in which precedents have been established, and it may be that we need to move to a more fundamental reform than Mr Wells or Mr Kinahan hinted at if we are to see real change in how things operate here.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his previous answers. There has been much debate,

particularly this year, about the reduction in legal costs. Will the Minister indicate whether consideration has been given, if there is a reduction in legal costs, to whether there can be negotiation with insurance companies to reduce their premiums as a result?

Mr Ford: I am not sure who might negotiate with the insurance companies about such matters, although I suspect that there may be a role for bodies such as the Office of Fair Trading or the Consumer Council. The reductions in legal costs that we have implemented at this stage have been solely around criminal defence work. The issue of the costs that are awarded in civil cases or the specific ways in which courts manage civil cases is still under review. I urge the Member and others to look at 'Access to Justice Review Northern Ireland: The Report' and contribute in that context.

3.00 pm

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am looking for some guidance on the process that allows a Minister to group questions. Is that a matter for the Minister concerned or is it decided in conjunction with the Business Office?

I have a second question. If a Member is tabled as one of the 15 lead questioners, are they entitled to ask a supplementary question?

Mr Speaker: On your first point, grouping questions is really up to the Minister. As Speaker, I have no role in that whatsoever.

On your further question, it is up to whoever is in the Chair at the time to call Members to ask supplementary questions. When I or my deputies call Members for supplementary questions, we have to be very careful of the balance in the House. We have to be careful, because a Member could be leading on a particular issue in the House. We also could have a Member leading on a particular issue within his or her constituency. Sometimes, Members believe that we sit up here and just call Members willy-nilly. We do not do that. We are very careful in how we call Members from all parties for supplementary questions. I know that there will be occasions when Members pop up and down in their place but do not get in. Hopefully, Members will understand why that is. I would like to think that all parties are doing reasonably well when it comes to Question Time and, especially, in asking supplementary questions.

Private Members' Business

Newly Qualified Teachers

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

Mr Craig: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the number of newly qualified teachers leaving full-time study without employment, or with little prospect of it; and calls on the Minister of Education, in conjunction with the Minister for Employment and Learning, to address the situation.

I want to clarify one issue before we start. Statements have been put out questioning the accuracy of some of the figures quoted earlier today. I remind the House that I was quoting figures that were supplied under AQW 777/11-15 in answer to a question from Mr Alex Easton. Those figures were signed off by no less than the deputy First Minister or Acting deputy First Minister — I am not quite sure of his title — our present Minister of Education, Mr O'Dowd. I want that clarified, Mr Speaker. There may be a question as to whether a Member of the House was misled or whether the Minister was misled regarding that issue.

Teaching used to be viewed as a safe job; one with security, good career prospects and rewards.

A Member: Good holidays.

Mr Craig: Good holidays; I agree. There are a few former teachers in the Chamber, and one is a Government Minister. It is, however, no longer the case that teaching is a safe job. In June this year, the Education Minister, Mr O'Dowd, responded to reports of an increase in teacher redundancies. Without doubt, many of those redundancies have been ushered in by the cutbacks in our block grant after the publication of the comprehensive spending review by Her Majesty's Government last October. That had a dramatic effect on public funds, not only in education.

As the axe has fallen on all Government Departments, it has obviously had an impact on education and library boards, which have less to spend on schools. That has impacted on

the number of teachers that can be employed. The Minister's statement that I referred to was in response to redundancies, which included teaching staff and classroom assistants. The majority of those redundancies were voluntary, but very few of those positions will be filled because there is no longer the money in the system to pay for them.

Earlier this year, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) demonstrated that the costs of providing substitute teachers had soared from £38 million in 2000 to £66 million in 2008. It also emerged that a large number of retired teachers were being re-employed through agencies to provide teaching cover in the classroom, for whatever reason. That poses problems for newly qualified teachers because, after graduation, many of them rely increasingly on agencies to secure work, albeit part time and temporary. That leaves a huge number of qualified teachers unemployed and questioning why they trained in the first place when they are likely to walk into a job that they could have had after their GCSEs, never mind A levels.

I know of many who spent many years training or without teaching work and have had to resort to jobs in the service sector or to look for something else to pay off the huge debt that they have found themselves in. Many young teachers have had a significant amount of money invested in them by the Government, which is ultimately wasted when they cannot secure jobs. The reason for the number of qualified teachers is down to the fact that, a number of years ago, we were crying out for teachers and could not get enough of them. Now, the tables have turned and a large number of teachers are left to claim unemployment benefit or work in a job for which they are well and truly overqualified, just to pay the bills.

A report issued by the Department of Education in 2006 found that a significant number of teaching posts went unfilled. They were in English, maths, science, home economics, technology and design, history and PE. Many of those are fields that are crucial to the economy and general skills of this country. Ironically, that report anticipated teacher shortages over time. However, the general view is that there are far too many qualified teachers trying to meet that demand. Statistics provided by the Department of Education in reply to a question for written answer show that the number of newly qualified teachers obtaining full-time permanent employment

within one year of graduation is extremely low. This year, that figure fell to almost 5% from 11% in 2006-07. Furthermore, the number of teachers securing employment outside Northern Ireland is extremely low. That is very worrying, and I seek to highlight it. I urge the Minister of Education and the Minister for Employment and Learning to take note. We need action on all of that.

It is regrettable that the Department cannot match supply with demand. That is a major issue. Why, as a Government, are we continually training graduate teachers for jobs that, frankly, are not there? That is a huge waste of government resources and something that I appeal to the Minister to look into to get a much closer relationship between supply and demand in that field.

The other huge difficulty that teachers have when they apply for the few full-time jobs that exist is that of experience. That is incredibly difficult for new graduate teachers coming out of colleges. I appeal to the Minister to look at the system that is being piloted in Scotland, which guarantees almost a year's full-time training in schools to, at least, give them one year's experience in teaching. That would be a big help to new graduates in finding jobs.

That is not unique in other fields of industry. I went to the University of Ulster, and the course that I took, which was mechanical engineering, guaranteed one year spent in industry. The experience that I gained in that year was invaluable for finding employment. It was a great boost, and most of the graduates from my year got employment because of that bit of experience. I appeal to the Executive to have a close look at that.

I want to quote a few lines that have come in to me since this debate was mentioned. Here is a man whose two sons have graduated from Stranmillis University College, and this letter maybe puts these real issues into perspective:

"One of the boys has been fortunate enough to have been employed for the past three years, even though those have been in three different schools. He has, for the first time, managed to secure a one-year contract in his fourth school this year, and he hopes that that will become permanent. The younger son graduated from Stranmillis in July of this year, and, unfortunately, he has not been able to secure any employment. He has managed to get three days as a substitute teacher since September".

I will try not to be party political about this at all. That was about Stranmillis. I also have a letter from someone who went to St Mary's University College:

"I am a qualified teacher that graduated from St Mary's University College in 2005. I have not been able to secure a full-time post in that length of time".

That is regrettable, and the fact that it occurs is absolutely regrettable for the individuals. I ask the Minister to look at the issue. Let us more carefully match supply and demand, but let us also look at ways to give limited experience to teachers so that they can secure employment.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Members for bringing this issue to the Floor. I welcome the opportunity to debate it. It is important, and all parties agree that the Department should ensure that opportunities for newly qualified teachers are increased and that they should get experience as soon as possible after qualifying. The Department clearly has taken steps on the issue of prematurely retired teachers, and changes to the common funding scheme, which came before the Education Committee earlier this month, will discourage prematurely retired teachers from returning to work post retirement. Obviously, there are limitations on people's right to employment, but no doubt the Department is exploring what it can do and acting upon that.

Monitoring the re-employment of prematurely retired teachers, encouraging the use of the substitute register, having employing authorities bear the cost of granting premature retirement to teachers and changes to the common funding scheme are all to be welcomed. The Member who spoke previously referred to a number of personal cases, and it is worth remembering that, when teachers get a placement, they should be treated fairly.

3.15 pm

We hear examples of substitute teachers who gain employment in September and work through to June, but, quite deliberately in a number of cases, are then dropped to save the payment of two months' wages. Of course, many substitute teachers are brought in on a daily rate for a long time, and, when that happens, it might be because of tight budgets or because of circumstances in that school. However, regardless of that, it is totally unacceptable. It is wrong that teachers have to get by from week

to week and face the pressures that come with that. Those are pressures that many people in other jobs do not have to face.

The Department should ensure that employment opportunities for teachers are maximised. That means addressing the need for mutual recognition of teaching qualifications across the entire country. When the Minister is summing up, perhaps he would update us on what work is being undertaken with his counterpart in the Dáil, Ruairí Quinn.

The issue is one of cuts across and between the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning. One must consider that the overall intake to initial teacher training courses has reduced in recent years by some 25%. However, I take on board the point made by the motion's proposer, which is that we need to try to match supply to demand, but that is a very complex process.

We should always be open to looking at practices in other jurisdictions to see what benefits they have, but the Scottish example has yet to be proven. However, it is important that the Department at least keeps an eye on how that goes. I agree with the general thrust of the motion and look forward to listening to the rest of the debate. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McNarry: I will deviate slightly. Following on from Kathryn Torney, Lindsay Fergus continues to provide excellent analysis and factual information in her coverage on education in the 'Belfast Telegraph'. Last week, the paper launched the Clarke manifesto, which is a 10-point advisory directive to all of us. Specifically referring to children, Liam Clarke advised that schools must be encouraged to share teachers and facilities, regardless of religion. He said that our segregated teacher training colleges should also be encouraged to co-operate and that the mess left by Caitríona Ruane over the 11-plus must be resolved by her successor John O'Dowd.

His advice may well be a bit of journalistic bravado, but, on that issue, he is bang on the button with advice that I believe is worth heeding. We are not alone in having to handle unprecedented unemployment among young teachers, and it comes at a time when it has emerged that the National Institute of Economic and Social Research now clearly suggests that the recovery from the recession will be slower than that from the Great Depression of the

1930s. It has also emerged that only one in five teachers in Scotland were able to find work, and almost another fifth were forced to pursue another career or leave Scotland altogether to find a job.

In respect of workforce planning, the situation of newly trained teachers has to be seen within the context of a low pupil:teacher ratio, which is 14·7 for post-primary schools and 20·2 for primary schools across Northern Ireland. The overall Northern Ireland pupil:teacher ratio is 16·11, which compares with 16·6 in England, 17·6 in Wales, and 13·3 in Scotland. That is a reflection of the drop in pupil numbers, which has led to the situation of unfilled desks in our schools. Therefore, we really have reached a moment of truth in the education system. That is why, last week, I called for the Department of Education to establish what we possess in respect of the schools estate and also where we stand in respect of the deployment of the teaching workforce and its backup administrative support. The demands being imposed by budgetary cutbacks inevitably mean that we need to get the best possible value for money, and we cannot know what we are doing without the kind of information that I have asked the Minister to provide, along with a planned exercise.

Whichever way one looks at it, it is clear that there has been an increase in the teacher workforce at a time of low pupil:teacher ratios across the education service and at a time when pupil numbers have, thankfully, remained relatively stable. School pupil numbers across all sectors are projected to increase by around only 5,000 net by 2016-17, with around 4,000 more in primary schools and fewer than 1,000 more in the post-primary sector. The increase in primary enrolment bodes well for the post-2016-17 primary school teacher workforce, but the effect of that will not work its way into secondary schools until 2023-24. The work-planning issues that that raises, in assessing how many teachers we need to train by sector over the next decade, have to be set in the context of the number of currently unemployed teachers by sector. We need to know what the net picture is. We need to see it.

How many will desert teaching permanently because they are disappointed that the Careers Service has pointed them in the direction of a career without enough jobs to sustain the numbers that are being trained? I call on the Minister to address not only the situation that

has arisen with unemployed graduate teachers but all the complex situations facing the education service. If he has a plan, hopefully it will be forthcoming and will be a priority plan. I am personally willing to share information with him on what we need to do and will have to do to put right the situation in the education service.

Mr McDevitt: I join colleagues in thanking Mr Craig for bringing the motion to the Assembly. It takes us to the heart of some of the big, strategic challenges that face the education system — challenges that always seem to come back, in one way or another, to the system's inability to plan for its own future. It puzzles me that a system that has been with us for so long, in which we have such a vested interest in getting right and of which we spend so much time celebrating the achievements should have some fundamentally big management problems — problems that just do not seem to go away but instead repeat themselves again and again and again. I think that it would be unfair to lay the blame for those problems at the current Minister's door. To be fair, they pre-date his being in post. We all know him to be a man who is capable of taking on more than one job at the best of times, and we look forward to his leadership showing through so that, at last, we can begin to address the issue.

As the Deputy Chairperson said, it is right to wonder about what happens when sixth-form pupils sit down with their careers adviser and are advised to become a teacher. They are told that teaching is a great job with loads of career prospects, only to discover, three or four years later, like all too many newly qualified teachers from whichever institution, that that, in fact, was a false promise. It is also right to wonder about how we are able to plan for our health service in a way that seems to understand and get ahead of demographic trends and birth rates when, for some reason, that does not seem to be a particularly important, measurable thing in our education system.

All of that is simply context. The issue at hand is, frankly, the management of a crisis. I acknowledge the many vested interests at play here and the right of people who have served a career in teaching and who, through no fault of their own, have found themselves redundant to be able to consider themselves as possible candidates for future employment. However, is that a greater right than the right of a newly qualified teacher to a job? I think that it is about time that we got real about that question.

Does someone who, through no fault of their own, finds themselves out of work but with a redundancy package — maybe an enhanced one — have a greater right to employment than someone who is at the other end of their career? It is a question that Ruairí Quinn, the Minister for Education and Skills in the Republic, sought to address in June. He did so by issuing a circular to all schools in which he basically told them to give preference to newly qualified teachers. He said, “That is my advice. I cannot force you to do it. But, as Minister, using all my political and moral authority that comes with that office, I tell you that, in my opinion, people who are beginning their careers deserve a break around here. I want you to be at the heart of giving them that break.”

We are told that it might cost up to £20 million each year to introduce a one-year guaranteed employment scheme for teachers in the region. Fair enough: I do not dispute the figures. However, the counter-question needs to be asked: how much does it cost us not to do that? How much does it cost us to educate teachers who end up on the broo? How much does it cost us to rehire very qualified teachers who may already have received redundancy payments at the public purse's expense and, we understand, are being rehired at higher rates of pay than newly qualified teachers? If the Minister addresses those questions, we may all be able to come to an informed view about the merits or otherwise of the one-year internship or professional placement scheme for teachers. However, I do not think that we can. I suspect, in his defence, that the figures are probably not available anyway. That comes back to the basic issue at the heart of the debate, which is a structural, cultural issue that makes it difficult for the system to be able to strategically plan and match its resources to needs.

I do not want to open up the wider issues because that would be unfair. However, I would like the Minister — I will end here —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McDevitt: I would like the Minister to acknowledge that it is not simply OK to leave the issue to be sorted out by market forces.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is definitely up.

Mr Lunn: Like other Members, I am glad that Mr Craig has brought the matter before the House. For those of us who are on the Committee for Education, it has been a concern for some

years. The Public Accounts Committee has also reported on the situation, particularly with regard to substitute teachers. Thankfully, the Department is now moving to address that issue by limiting the amount of money that it contributes towards the cost of a substitute teacher. That is long overdue. It may be necessary to go further. Hopefully, it will mean that newly qualified teachers will, at least, get some classroom experience.

I have nothing but sympathy for the hundreds of teaching graduates — a number that has built up over several years — who entered university and teacher training full of hope and expectation only to find that there are no jobs and few prospects and that they are forced to seek employment in other areas. Most teachers enter the profession because they believe that they are following a vocation — a difficult but vital vocation. We must wonder at the lack of forward planning that has produced the extraordinary outcome of so many teachers who are surplus to requirements.

These days, all the information is available to predict trends in birth rates, the number of empty desks, retirement rates and class sizes. We constantly hear it quoted that there will be 50,000 empty desks in the education system. Do we still base our calculations for the number of teachers who are needed on false and out-of-date assumptions? Do we not know how many teachers are due to retire from year to year? Whatever method is being used, it has produced an intolerable situation. Today, I hear that 5% of this year's graduates will find work. I do not query the accuracy of that figure as it stands, but, as it is early days, I would hope that it would improve, and I have some reservations about it.

The more telling figures are those from the past few years. The last figures that I saw, which were produced by the General Teaching Council, show a rapid downward trend in employment rates leading to a figure of around 22% for the class of 2010. That figure is frightening.

3.30 pm

Mr P Maskey: I sat on the PAC with the Member last term. With regard to the number of teachers who qualify every year, I take the point that we need to look seriously at the re-employment of recently retired teachers and at the fact that that does not give employment opportunities to young teachers who have recently graduated.

However, look at, for example, the number of politics students who graduate every year. How many jobs do those people get in politics? The same applies to newly graduated bioscientists. If you look at all new graduates in isolation, how do we work that out? It is wrong for us to look at one specific group of people — in this case, teachers. If you go through all the universities, you will see that there are people who graduate from many different courses who do not get a job in the field related to those courses.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lunn: He probably used about a minute, Mr Speaker, but not to worry. I take the point, but I will not compare teachers to politics students, because I might ask why anybody would become a politics student, frankly. I will move on.

I would query the need for more than one training college, but, in the current training system, there are almost 1,500 students at various stages of their qualification. Those students must wonder what the future holds. On current performance, it would be optimistic even to say that 1,200 of them will not move into teaching after graduation. A large proportion will never do so and already have no prospect of becoming a full-time teacher during their working life.

We can add to that the inevitable changes that are coming over the horizon whether we like it or not. None of those will increase teacher requirements. I am talking about the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) — if we ever get there — which is supposed to be an efficiency measure. I am also talking about sustainable schools, area-based planning and the urgent rationalisation of our various school systems. If the Minister can bring about the changes in those areas that we all know are necessary and cannot be put off for ever, there will be an inevitable reduction in the number of teaching posts available.

There is a massive challenge here for the Minister of Education, and I wish him well with it. We cannot justify the current level of teacher training or, frankly, the number of institutions providing it. I know that that involves the Minister for Employment and Learning as well. We need to encourage teachers who feel that they have contributed enough to their profession to leave, and we should facilitate their exit. If there are ways to do that, I would like to hear about them so that we can make room for new blood.

I always go back to the issue of substitute teachers. We need to ensure that only in exceptional circumstances can a retired teacher be used for substitution over a suitably qualified new teacher. The term “exceptional circumstances” has been used in departmental circulars since the 1980s.

As others said, the information given to students who choose the university pathway should include, if it does not already, a clear indication of the job prospects and the kind of statistics that prompted this debate.

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

Mr Lunn: I agree with Mr McDevitt about the guaranteed year; he put the case for that very eloquently. The current situation is not sustainable, and I look forward to the Minister's comments.

Miss M McIlveen: I declare an interest as someone who was once a newly qualified teacher, although that was more years ago now than I care to admit.

Mr McDevitt is correct when he speaks of careers advice. I was not advised against teaching, and, for Mr Lunn's information, I was advised against studying politics. I ignored that advice, trained as a politics teacher and ended up here. There is a moral to that story somewhere.

I thank my colleagues on the Education Committee for securing the debate. However, like many motions regarding education that come before the Chamber, there is a certain sense of groundhog day. That is by no means a criticism of the motion. It was in June 2007, over four years ago, that the employment prospects of newly qualified teachers were first raised with the Minister's predecessor in a notice of motion before the Assembly, and here we are again debating the issue.

Mr Craig: I thank the Member for giving way. I recall that debate four years ago, and the one thing that I find remarkable is that the situation with the recruitment of new teachers has got worse. Two years ago, almost 14% found employment straight away. Last year, it was 10%. This year, it is 5%. So, although I agree with you that we are having a bit of a groundhog day, it is, unfortunately, now far worse for those who went through teacher training this year than

those who did so four years ago, which I think you will agree is regrettable.

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

Miss M McIlveen: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I concur with my colleague's remarks, and it has taken a considerable time to start to address that issue.

In June, the Committee was briefed on measures that have been introduced to encourage the employment of newly qualified teachers. Mr McKay referred to those. Guidance was given that advised that the Northern Ireland substitute teacher register should be used when booking all substitute teachers. However, languishing on the substitute teacher register does not give you the experience that you need to secure long-term employment. It serves as a stopgap but is not a solution to this problem, and, of course, guidance is simply guidance and can be ignored by schools.

The Department also advised that the reimbursement of teacher substitution costs was limited, to provide an incentive for schools to employ newly or recently qualified teachers. Again, that argument does not stack up. Capping costs in no way encourages schools to employ newly or recently qualified teachers. All it meant was that a maximum amount would be paid, whatever the experience of the teacher.

We were also advised that the Department has been monitoring the re-employment of prematurely retired teachers on a monthly basis since September 2010. However, that is more than three years after the debate about newly qualified teachers about which I spoke earlier. The wheels grind ever slowly in the Department, and the reason for that monitoring, we are told, is to seek an explanation why those teachers are being re-employed in preference to others.

The rules of the teachers' pension scheme mean that retired teachers may see a reduction in their pension if employed as a teacher. That seems entirely proper. However, it does not stop the re-employment happening. The Department also stated that a measure to encourage the employment of newly qualified teachers has been the requirement that employing authorities bear the costs of granting premature retirement to teachers. That caused me a little head scratching, particularly when I am informed that, as a result, there has been

a dramatic reduction in premature retirements since 2008, with none granted since April 2010. That is to be expected, but how is it of assistance to newly qualified teachers? The Department said that that reduced the stock of prematurely retired teachers and schools will, therefore, need to look more frequently to newly qualified and other non-retired teachers when filling vacancies. However, surely the fact that there are no spaces due to teachers not being granted premature retirement means that there are no spaces for newly qualified teachers as a result.

Last month, the Minister finally announced changes that would be of benefit to newly qualified teachers. Among them was the requirement that schools would be liable for the total cost of employing a prematurely retired teacher. That, more than any of the previous so-called measures, should prove to be an incentive for schools to take on newly qualified teachers, but the question is "Why has it taken so long, and is it enough?". From my experience, however, that is still providing only window dressing. Unless, as my colleague stated, a newly qualified teacher is lucky enough to obtain employment or cover for maternity leave or long-term sick leave, he or she will have extreme difficulty completing their probationary training year. Until that is addressed, there will be continuing problems facing newly and recently qualified teachers in obtaining employment. As I pointed out, that becomes increasingly difficult when fewer vacancies are available due to the reduction in premature retirements, and, in the meantime, we are producing more and more teachers.

I accept what the Minister stated about a 25% reduction in the past five years, but I also understand the need for flexibility in the model. However, that has not managed the expectation of those training to be teachers that they will get the necessary experience to find permanent positions. Four years ago, cost was the excuse for not providing a McCrone-style agreement guaranteeing an induction year. We have heard figures of £12 million for year 1 and £20 million in subsequent years.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Miss M McIlveen: I would like the Minister to qualify what those costs mean. I understand that McCrone is being reviewed, and I look

forward to the outcome and how that will assist in future discussions in relation to Northern Ireland.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an díospóireacht seo. I welcome the debate, which is relevant to both the Minister and Department of Education and to the Minister and Department for Employment and Learning. I am pleased that the Minister of Education and the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, in the absence of the Employment and Learning Minister, are present for the debate.

I share concerns about any newly qualified teacher leaving full-time study without employment or with a limited prospect of employment. I have close family knowledge of that, as a relation of mine had to diversify and, after a period of unemployment, took up a post teaching essential skills as part of the Steps to Work programme. It was pointed out to me just today that, in the current economic climate, few graduates walk straight into employment in any discipline, which, of course, is unfortunate. For example, a good number of recently qualified speech and language therapists have to emigrate to secure employment. That is very challenging. Teachers are not alone in suffering the experience of not having the guarantee of a job after full-time education.

Statistics are often quoted giving the percentage of full-time students who are not employed three months after leaving full-time study. Although I stand to be corrected, I understand that 87% of those who graduate from St Mary's University College, Belfast have managed to secure full-time employment after four years, which is a considerable time. I ask the Minister of Education whether he has any figures to hand and whether he could combine, for example, figures for annual intakes to initial teacher education at Stranmillis, St Mary's and Queen's and compare those with the number of local students who travel to England for teacher training. I understand that the latter figure may be greater than the former.

I commend the Department of Education for initiating measures aimed at advantaging newly qualified teachers over retired teachers in the management of substitute cover. I would like to hear more detail on that when the Minister responds to the debate.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Member for giving way. Is it not ironic that this morning we talked about underachievement in many schools in disadvantaged areas and now we are talking about a surplus of teachers? Does the Member agree that there must be some way of marrying the various Department initiatives, from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's (OFMDFM) social investment fund right down to neighbourhood renewal? Surely we can marry those initiatives with the surplus of young, talented and ambitious qualified teachers who are becoming very disillusioned when they finish training.

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

Mr McElduff: I thank Mr Douglas for his point, which I am sure the Minister has heard and absorbed. I agree that creative thinking is needed to ensure meaningful employment and to marry the various government policies.

In conclusion, I take this opportunity to record my sympathy on the recent passing of the northern secretary of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), Mr Frank Bunting, who was a champion of social justice and teachers' rights. I want to think about him at this time.

3.45 pm

Lord Morrow: In a statement on 10 June, the Minister of Education said:

"Due to movement in the system there is always a certain level of redundancies; however the level is far below that of around five years ago when the figure was regularly over 500. Furthermore, the majority of these are voluntary redundancies."

He continued:

"Furthermore, over the last five years the number of teacher training posts has been cut by almost 25%, reflecting the expected future demand for teachers."

Those startling figures tell the story.

Today's debate is timely. I suspect that every MLA around the Chamber could cite instances of young teachers who have recently qualified and are waiting for a post. Indeed, I am aware of one young teacher who qualified some eight years ago and has not, to date, got a full-time teaching post. Just imagine the demoralisation that that causes to people who have gone

through the rigours of third-level education, prepared for the teaching profession that they wanted to enter and discovered at the end of it all that there is no future in it for them.

We will not prejudice the Minister, but it is an issue that he needs to take very seriously. I hope that he takes it a bit more seriously than his predecessor did. She left a lot to be desired. It came across that the issue was not important to her. We will give the new Minister the opportunity to demonstrate in clear and unambiguous terms that he takes the matter seriously and will put the future of young, recently qualified teachers at the top of his list of priorities. Society as a whole demands that.

Another issue needs to be examined and tackled, and I would like the Minister to comment on it when he responds to the debate. We hear constantly of teachers retiring, picking up their redundancy package and, in a very short time, being back in the teaching system. Were there not a large pool of young graduates and ably qualified teachers ready to take up those posts, that might be all right. That is another challenge for the Minister. He should take a long, hard, serious look at teachers who retire and immediately re-enter the teaching profession. When there is a pool of able and capable teachers waiting to take up posts, it cannot be right by anyone's standards.

No one here would say that the teaching profession is not vital to the future well-being of Northern Ireland, as it prepares young people for the future. However, there is something drastically wrong with a system that cannot provide for highly qualified young professionals coming into the teaching stream. Surely, there is a case to be made that young teachers coming into the profession are more able than those who have retired and left the system just to re-enter it. I recognise that they bring experience, but new teachers come in with new ideas, techniques and abilities. If the present Minister will take that on board, he will do a service not only to the young professionals but to society as a whole. I trust that this is one issue that he will concentrate some of his efforts on and that he will not let us down in the way that the previous Minister did. She was quite flippant; she showed no regard and brought no professionalism to the matter at all. I suspect that this Minister might be different. I urge him to be different and not to take his cue from the previous Minister. I urge him to ensure

that young teachers preparing for the teaching profession have a future.

Furthermore, if the present system continues, it will discourage people from qualifying as teachers. I trust that the Minister will ensure that that does not happen either. Otherwise, we will end up with a teaching profession that no one wants to enter because there is —

Mr Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Lord Morrow: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr B McCrea: A number of points have been raised, and it might be worth looking at the facts in response to those. Mr McDevitt asked why we keep going over the same issue again and again. He and Mr Lunn asked why we did not plan for the number of teachers required. I also want to deal with the issue that Lord Morrow raised about substitution.

The first thing to say is that we tried to deal with it before. We realised that there was going to be a problem. The Minister of Education at the time, Caitríona Ruane, produced figures for the teachers that we would require, fed them to the Minister for Employment and Learning, Sir Reg Empey, and discovered that she had inadvertently closed St Mary's College on the Falls Road because there were not sufficient teachers to make it viable. There then transpired a bit of negotiation to the effect that we could not have that, so we inflated the numbers again to make sure that St Mary's was viable. To be fair, we also inflated the figures for Stranmillis to make it viable.

I can tell you what the figures are now. To do the initial teacher education in Stranmillis — it will read across to St Mary's — we need 80 primary, 50 post-primary and 15 postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) places, but we have an additional 277 to do extra stuff, which is not costed. It is costed only for a three-year process, and that period is coming to an end. The situation is not viable. People ask me where that number came from. It was actually published in the Hansard report of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) meeting on 16 September 2010. My colleague Mr Beggs asked:

"Are we training too many teachers and bringing students in who build up loans, with little prospect of a post being available at the end of the course?"

Mr Sweeney, the permanent secretary, said:

"In response to that stark choice, we have reduced the intake by 27%. As a result, we will reach a critical mass threshold, below which we might erode the viability of local institutions. That would be a bold decision to take".

What is actually happening is that we refused to close St Mary's because of political considerations. We have actually produced more teachers than we can find positions for.

Mr P Maskey: I have the figures that Mr McElduff gave earlier. After four years, there is an 87% employment rate among students from St Mary's. That is one hell of a good return. That rate is absolutely excellent.

Mr B McCrea: I am thankful for the Member's intervention. I believe that he was the Chair of the Committee —

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

Mr B McCrea: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Let me read out what it says in the Hansard report of that Committee. The Department told the Committee:

"of the 792 teachers who graduated in 2009 from institutions in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, only 200, which is 25%, have obtained either a permanent or part-time teaching post."

That is by February 2010. More generally, 2,456 teachers who had graduated over the period 2004-09 had still not been able to obtain a teaching post in 2009-2010. The figures are stark. Mr Lunn said it, and I agree with him: we have too many teacher training facilities. We are producing too many teachers for the vacancies that we have.

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

The figures are stark for the demand from people who want to teach because they have a vocation and want to do it. In 2011-12, the prediction is — I have them for the whole bit — that there will be 1,922 applicants to Stranmillis alone for only 233 places. There is huge demand. What do they do if they do not get a place? They go to England, where there is a demand. They train there and then come back and are in a better position to get a job than our people. The Minister raises his eyes. That is the position.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I am sorry; I have 30 seconds. You can deal with it in your reply.

The issue comes to this: we will shortly have to look at the merger of Stranmillis and Queen's, and, for my money, we have to bite the bullet and look at St Mary's as well. We are producing too many teachers, and there are not enough jobs. It is absolutely unfair. The Minister should take a decision and do what is right and proper to manage the labour supply of teachers.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As a member of the Education Committee, I welcome the debate. I understand that we have enough teachers in some areas but not enough in others, such as special needs, Irish-medium education, science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects and basic literacy and numeracy. Along with school principals, boards of governors and others involved in the management of schools, we need to do more to ensure that qualified teachers get into employment. We need to ensure that that is done through the use of the substitute register. I acknowledge the fact that the Department of Education has issued guidance to employers on that issue, but it needs to be fully reinforced and more robust. It is important that students who seek to enter teacher training colleges are advised about shortages and priorities in relation to courses. It is important that their specific training reflects what is needed in the school system in the long term.

I do not want to dwell on what has already been said. I want to share with the House what a young qualified teacher of four years' standing said to me when she heard that the motion was to be debated today. Her only employment in that four-year period has been up to six months a year as a substitute teacher. Like many others, it is her desire to have a full-time teaching position; in fact, she would even settle for a full part-time position. She has applied for what limited vacancies arise but to no avail. There has been no opportunity to get employment. She is willing to travel any distance, except abroad, to teach and to gain permanent employment. She studied here for four years to make a contribution to society through something that she is passionate about. She refuses to go abroad like many

of her friends and colleagues in the teaching profession. She is from a teaching background; her parents and siblings are teachers. There are many issues that she has had to endure in the four years since she qualified as a teacher. She does not tick a box for anything. She is unable to gain hire purchase for a car. She cannot access any benefits for the two months in the summer recess during which she is unemployed. She has no way of getting a loan, and nor can she afford to pay any loans back. She is getting into debt through family members. As a result, her mental health and well-being are suffering. She has nothing to show for all her years of training. She told me that she is aware that there are substitute teachers who have been qualified for more than four years who are being paid by the week. This girl lives one mile from Lifford but cannot avail herself of teaching posts in the South because of the different curriculums. That issue also needs to be addressed.

In November 2010, up to 2,500 teachers were seeking employment. I am sure that that figure has risen. The re-employment of retired teachers for substitution is wholly unacceptable. In the interest of fairness, the situation where newly qualified teachers are desperately seeking teaching opportunities should be addressed. The House would acknowledge that, in the current climate, there are limited opportunities for employment in all walks of life. However, the issue that we are debating must be addressed as soon as possible and as a matter of urgency.

4.00 pm

Mr D McIlveen: I, too, welcome the motion. The Member must be congratulated on proposing it.

There is no doubt that the supply and demand for graduates to teaching positions is out of kilter, so something must be done about it urgently. However, I have more specific concerns about existing inequalities between newly qualified Catholic and Protestant teachers. Those concerns are clearly demonstrated by the example of those who have graduated with PGCE and primary-school teaching qualifications. Currently, in Northern Ireland, around 50% of primary schools are Catholic maintained and 50% are controlled. The official 2010-11 figures are: 383 controlled and 396 Catholic maintained.

We have heard about the lack of opportunities for newly qualified teachers. To increase their

chance of employment, therefore, graduates will wish to be able to apply to 100% of primary schools. However, to teach in a Catholic maintained primary or nursery school, teachers must have a Catholic certificate in religious education. There are only three options for Northern Ireland students who want to obtain that certificate.

First, St Mary's students are advised by the college about the requirement and can opt to take the certificate only if they are doing the four-year degree course there. Protestant students are not likely to study at St Mary's for one year, let alone four years. Therefore, that provision is simply not suitable for Protestant students. Secondly, the primary PGCE course at the University of Ulster includes integrated study for the religious certificate, which students receive on graduating from the course. However, again, there is no provision for simply taking the certificate by itself. Other students are left with one option: they must take a part-time, distance learning course from the University of Glasgow, which last for 24 months and costs £480. From 2012-13, the fee is set to increase to £800.

We have a system, therefore, in which Protestant primary-school teachers coming out of university are seriously disadvantaged in two ways. First, those who lack the certificate have significantly reduced chances of employment in the country as a whole, because they will not be considered for employment by Catholic maintained primary schools. I have already outlined the difficulties with obtaining the certificate, so, secondly, as Protestant schools also consider and employ Catholic applicants —

Mr Wells: I am sure that the honourable Member had a slip of the tongue, but there are no Protestant schools in Northern Ireland; there are state schools, which are open. I went to a state grammar school where a third of the boys were Roman Catholic. Similarly, a high proportion of students at Stranmillis are from the Roman Catholic tradition and are very welcome at it.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for his intervention; I assure him that it was a slip of the tongue. I take his point fully on board.

The fundamental inequality in our education system must be remedied. All those who

graduate as teachers should be able to work across Northern Ireland, irrespective of religious barriers. We have heard many statistics about unemployed newly qualified teachers, and it genuinely angers me that Protestant teachers have another hurdle to overcome. I shall give an example from my constituency. Recently, a lady came to me with concerns about her son, who trained to be a teacher at Stranmillis College. Due to the difficulties that I outlined, the young man in question is now taking a job in the Middle East. Surely that is not a cost-effective solution for dealing with our young people.

The Minister must answer two fundamental questions. First, will there be equality in teaching across all sectors — in other words, freedom for all? Secondly, if not, will we commit to joint or shared education across the board? In this new era of peace and reconciliation, we simply cannot have a state within a state. It is imperative that we level the playing field. Consequently, I strongly advocate that we begin to properly consider a truly integrated education system. The DUP is a vocal and proactive supporter of integrated education. In my opinion, we need to amplify the debate. The First Minister has already said on record that he believes that future generations will find it difficult to believe that separation in education based on faith ever existed. I sincerely hope that we can work together to make that a reality. If the people on this side of the House are serious about moving forward, I urge them to go back to their communities and ensure that this inequality is dealt with once and for all.

Mr Byrne: I congratulate Mr Craig for tabling the motion. It represents the pain among young teachers who cannot get work. We all agree that young teachers who have been trained face a terrible situation. They are innocent victims of what I call a systems failure. It is important that the Department of Education really starts to listen to the pain that is being experienced.

Young teachers cannot get permanent teaching jobs; they cannot even get temporary or part-time teaching posts. Indeed, they do not even get a chance to do a probationary period of teaching after they qualify. That is a great handicap for many of those young people. As Michaela Boyle said, many of them experience deep demoralisation. They are the victims of a vicious circle. As Lord Morrow said, they cannot even get shortlisted for jobs because they do not meet the experience criteria, which is

demoralising and grossly unfair to those young people.

Young people who embark on teacher training have made a career choice that they want to pursue. They have stayed on in school, done their A levels, decided to do a three- or four-year teacher training course and have come out with £15,000 to £20,000 of debt for a student loan. When they cannot get a teaching job, they feel cheated and badly let down by the system. Many of them cannot get a start in their careers even in temporary work as substitute teachers in schools. Unfortunately, there is an abuse of the system. Many retired teachers are continually hired in schools in obvious preference to young newly trained teachers. That is where the system is grossly unfair.

Mr B McCrea: I know the point that the Member is trying to make. I did not get a chance to say it during my speech, but the PAC report states:

"We acknowledge that prematurely retired teachers account for only 13 per cent of substitution days".

Therefore, it is only 13%.

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

Mr P Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. The Member misquoted the PAC. The quote is actually from an Audit Office report.

Mr B McCrea: I acknowledge the correction, but the information is still relevant.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Byrne has the Floor.

Mr Byrne: I accept Mr McCrea's point. However, if you talk to young teachers who cannot get a job, that issue comes up all the time. Many principals, when they need a substitute teacher, ring up a former teacher. They ring up somebody who has experience, so the situation perpetuates itself. If we are not going to give young teachers a chance to get started, they will never be able to get into the system. That is the human tragedy of the situation.

In many cases, young teachers are being overlooked for temporary posts while teachers are on maternity leave or long-term sickness. As I said, many school principals are taking the easy way out. I have friends who are retired teachers, and I say to them that they are

keeping young people out of a job. We have to face up to that, and I call on the Department of Education to face up to the issue. Some guidelines have been issued, but they are being ignored. I accept the fact that if a teacher of A-level maths, science or another specialist subject goes off on sickness or maternity leave, a principal will very often want to hire an experienced teacher to carry on and finish the A-level course in the interests of the students. However, that is not always the case. Some principals take the easy way out and quite simply hire retired teachers to make life easier for themselves.

In 2008-09, we could have saved £6 million if newly qualified teachers had been hired to provide cover instead of prematurely retired teachers. That would be a start to addressing the issues that we are talking about. We need to restrict the use of retired teachers for substitution, and we need a one-year post-degree job placement scheme for young teachers. There are costs, but the current human costs are greater.

We should attempt to introduce the Scottish model here. If a young qualified teacher could get a one-year probationary period within the first two years of graduating, they would at least have some sense of hope. I urge the Minister to try to listen to the case that many Members have made.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate. I will clarify the figures; it appears that every time I respond to a debate, I have to clarify figures. Mr Craig said that 5-6% of newly qualified staff receive full-time permanent employment, and that figure is accurate. However, the Department uses figures that include newly qualified teachers who are on long-term contracts and who are covering for long-term leave, and those figures are recognised by the General Teaching Council. Technically, both figures are correct, which is often the case when you are dealing with figures and arguments.

At the outset, I add my voice to Mr McElduff's comments about the late Frank Bunting. It is appropriate that, in the first education debate of the new term, we recognise his contribution.

There is no doubt that newly qualified teachers face difficulties in gaining full-time employment. In the current economic circumstances, many people face difficulties in obtaining employment,

particularly in their recognised field. However, the Department of Education has not been sitting on its hands since the previous debate or, indeed, during the previous mandate when my predecessor, Catriona Ruane, was in office. As my speech progresses, I will outline several initiatives that have been taken and which are beginning to have an effect on several issues that Members have raised.

However, all of that must be constructed within the law. When we call upon prematurely retired teachers not to re-enter the system, we have to remember that being older is not against the law. When I look around the Chamber, I see a bit of grey hair, including my own. If we follow the analysis of some Members, people with grey hair and who are over a certain age should all retire and move on and allow younger politicians to move in. That is the challenge that we are putting out. *[Interruption.]* Do not tempt me.

Lord Morrow: The Minister is very good at taking things and changing them around. I recognise that he has a few grey hairs and that I have less hair than I used to have. The point that was being made was about people picking up their redundancy today and re-entering the system next Monday morning.

Mr O'Dowd: Yes; although we jest, it is a serious matter. My predecessor and I have taken action on prematurely retired teachers. However, I caution against some of the language that is being used today. Is a highly qualified base of young people who are not currently employed as teachers a "waste", as one Member said? Are we in a "crisis", as Mr McDevitt said? That needs further analysis. We are certainly not in "groundhog day", as Michelle McIlveen suggested. Miss McIlveen informed the House that she is a qualified teacher and taught in the profession, but she is now a very capable MLA. Do we refer to Miss McIlveen as an "unemployed teacher"? Where do we draw the line in describing people who have gone through the colleges?

As we debate the issues, it is important that we are realistic. In not only the teaching profession but in many walks of life, there is increasing competition for jobs. All of the initial teaching qualification courses that are offered here are heavily oversubscribed, and Mr McCrea also referred to that. The fact that there are up to eight times more applications than there are places is an indication of the strength of

demand and the quality of the young people who want to enter the teaching profession. It is also an indication of the quality of those who go on to teach in our schools.

The situation is not down to poor careers advice. Those young people, who are highly qualified when they leave post-primary school, have made a conscious decision. Knowing the risks and the obstacles to full-time employment, they have decided that they want to go into higher education through our teaching universities, because they realise that going through a teaching degree also qualifies them for a broader marketplace.

The primary task of our teacher training colleges is to provide teachers for our schools. However, young people who are looking at their career options, particularly in the current economic climate, are asking themselves, "What qualifications can I achieve to give me a broader appeal to the employment market?"

4.15 pm

I am keen to remove the obstacles to employment, and I am keen that any obstacles to cross-border mobility are addressed. Indeed, Ms Boyle referred to that subject.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I am keen for that to happen so that teachers here can also avail themselves of employment opportunities in the South. Indeed, I will attend a North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meeting tomorrow where the work of the teacher qualifications working group will be discussed. That group continues to build on the progress that has been made to date on the mutual recognition of teaching qualifications and on the easing of other teacher educational-related barriers.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: If the Member will give me a moment, I will.

Although we should, rightly, provide opportunities for people who aspire to be teachers to enter initial teacher education courses, we must carefully manage their expectations. Given the highly qualified nature of our young people who are seeking to enter our teaching courses, the careers advice that is now available to them, and, indeed, given the media and political attention on the high numbers of unemployed

qualified teachers, I have no doubt that young people are assessing their options before entering our training colleges.

Mr Wells: The Minister described himself as an unemployed cook, but he has probably done rather better than he expected. I am a Member whose mother, wife and two daughters are teachers. The Minister has not indicated whether he will stop schools demanding that, before someone can apply for a full-time teaching job, they must have six months' full-time experience. That is a major obstacle. Very few other employers do that, yet 89% or 90% of adverts in the job pages in the local newspapers deliberately put up that false barrier to teachers.

Mr O'Dowd: I will address that as I go through my speech.

I referred to the figures and to how we assess the number of teachers currently in employment. Those statistics do not necessarily mean that those who are unsuccessful in gaining a teaching post are currently unemployed or, indeed, currently seeking a teaching post here. Figures obtained from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for June 2011 show that 17 claimants under the age of 30 who sought a teaching occupation were unemployed for more than 26 weeks. There were 113 claimants under the age of 30 whose occupation sought was teaching, and they were unemployed for less than 26 weeks.

It is important to ensure that the numbers who join approved initial training for education courses reflect the needs of our schools system both in the short and long term and then present value for money. We must also ensure that we have in place a system that supports an overall viable and vibrant teacher training sector that meets the needs of our pluralist education system. The direct matching of teacher supply with demand is complex, given that the number and types of vacancies that occur in any one year are influenced by a number of factors but principally by the decisions that schools take on the desired size of their teaching complements and the designation of teaching posts as full-time or part-time.

I will deal with the Member's point. At the behest of Assembly, the autonomy on employment matters rests with the board of governors of each school. That has been one of the sticking points during the ESA discussions. I, as Minister, cannot direct a school on the

criteria under which a person is employed and nor can the Department of Education, the boards or Council for Catholic Maintained Schools. As long as the criteria are legal and boards of governors act within employment law, they can set certain criteria. We have requested clarification from a number of employing authorities on how they have presented a number of further attributes to employment. However, six-month qualifications are, in my opinion, a matter that fits within current employment legislation, but I am willing to be corrected on that.

As Mr McCrea said, my Department determines on an annual basis the intake levels of courses of initial teacher education having carefully considered the overall forecast demand for teachers based on a range of statistical information. That includes outputs from the operation of the teacher demands statistical model and takes account of pupil numbers, teaching employment, teacher migration and teacher vacancies.

To a large extent, newly qualified teachers are unable to find permanent posts due to falling rolls. Pupil numbers have declined from almost 341,000 in 2003-04 to almost 322,000 in 2010-11. But they are projected to rise, as Mr McNarry indicated, by 2016-17. Although pupil numbers are an important factor in determining the intake, many others also need to be taken into account. It is also necessary to forecast the need for teachers in specific priority or shortage areas, including, for example, STEM-related disciplines, Irish medium, modern languages and early years. My Department carries out an annual survey of schools to gauge vacancies in those areas.

Overall, the provision made available at individual institutions is aimed at meeting the differing needs of our schools system and ensuring that appropriate routes are made available. Although the North of Ireland needs a similar number of teachers, it does not necessarily mean that they can be trained at a single institution. Therefore, I am conscious of the need to maintain and develop the capacity of local IT providers to educate teachers to meet the diverse needs of our pluralist education system.

That brings me to the question that was raised by Mr McCrea. His history of events over the past years was potted, but, how and ever, he got

to the core of the issue. We have two teacher-training colleges. Both are very fine institutions. If we continue to drill down below a certain number, one or other of those colleges will no longer be viable. We have to ask ourselves a question: as an Assembly that wishes to assist in working our way out of the economic downturn, do we want to start closing down institutions of further and higher education where young people can achieve a quality education with widely recognised qualifications?

I wonder whether some people looking in on the debate will be saying that the Assembly is complaining that we have too many highly qualified young people. That is the other side of the argument. It has been proven around the world that the sustainable way to work our way out of economic recession is to have a highly qualified base of young people. We can close down one or other of our institutions, but I go back to the figures that I commented on earlier: there is still a high demand from young people to go into the teaching profession. Yes, they want to go into schools and carry out their vocation, but they also see it as a pathway to other courses and employment. We can close one of our institutions and ship our young people over to England, Scotland or Wales, or down South; however, we have to ask ourselves a serious question about planning for the future. I am of the view that the way forward is with our current teacher-training institutions. That allows us to build out of recession.

Mr B McCrea: I appreciate the Minister giving way. The issue is not that we are worried about having highly qualified young people; it is that we are worried about having highly qualified unemployed young people with no prospect of employment. I am quite happy for people to say to me that we think that, in the longer term, there will be a role for those people. That is fair enough. However, the other issue is that careers advice relates not just to teachers: we produce too many lawyers and other professionals.

Mr O'Dowd: I appreciate what the Member said, but I have to get on to look at the way we have dealt with the issues surrounding the motion. Ruairí Quinn sent out a circular, and I know that the Chair of the Education Committee loves circulars, but, as Mr McDevitt requested, my Department has already sent out guidance to schools on the employment of newly or prematurely retired teachers. Our recent changes to the common funding formula will

ensure that schools will meet the cost of that. I understand that members of the Education Committee are seeking to challenge that decision because they see it as a burden on schools. You cannot have it both ways. The only way that we can change the attitudes in schools is by legislation, and, as I said, we cannot discriminate in law, or by taxation through the common funding formula that will allow those schools to work out —

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I am stuck for time, Chair.

We are working through it in that way. As I said, we have ensured through the circular that schools are monitored on how they employ staff. I encourage any Member who is also on a board of governors to use their influence on substitute teacher matters to insist that the boards adhere to the departmental guidance and give a chance to newly qualified teachers.

I am aware of the report in Scotland and that a year's induction work is provided there for newly qualified teachers. That has been costed. It would cost the Executive £20 million a year. It is currently being reviewed by the Scottish Executive. I have asked my officials to monitor the situation very closely and to report back to me on the findings of the report and the Scottish Executive. If favourable recommendations come out of the report, I assure you that I will bring them to the attention of the Education Committee —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Minister bring his remarks to a close?

Mr O'Dowd: — and, more importantly, to the Executive and the Department of Finance and Personnel to fund any opportunity to ensure that our newly qualified teachers are given a chance in life.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Mervyn Storey, the Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

Mr Storey: I preface my remarks by concurring with the comments made about the sad passing of Frank Bunting. We have passed on our sympathies to his family. Education will miss not having someone as colourful as Frank was in the way in which he carried out his business.

I congratulate my colleagues in securing the debate. As we bring it to a conclusion, it is

right and proper to pass comment on what the Minister outlined. He referred to the figures. Even though he qualified it by saying that my colleague was “technically” correct, the reality is that the figures speak for themselves: 13.74% down to 10.71%, down to 5.6%. Remember that, when the Department does its calculations, it does not always take into account the total graduate number. It takes into account only the number of graduates who have registered with the General Teaching Council. We could spend all day going back and forward on figures. However, the stark reality for at least 95% of qualified teachers out there is that they do not have a place of employment.

I refer to a point that seemed to exercise Mr McElduff and another Member on the opposite side of the House with regard to the number of Roman Catholic teachers who were employed as a result of attending St Mary's. I do not believe that ‘The Irish News’ is in any way associated with the unionist community, albeit it is a paper that is exceptionally good for educational coverage. However, in 2008, it stated:

“Fewer than 40 of 800 graduate teachers got jobs in Catholic schools last year ... Figures show that a relatively small number of graduates secured employment in the Catholic sector and most were only awarded temporary contracts.”

I rest my case with regard to ‘The Irish News’.

The Minister said that the Department has not been sitting on its hands. However, it took the Minister 13 minutes to get to the point where he started to tell us what it has done. Then he told us that what it has done is to make changes to the common funding formula. He referred to the fact that some of us have raised concerns about those changes. Here is the reason why we raised those concerns. Item (e) says:

“to remove the criteria for centre substitution costs of the common funding formula where teachers have been required to be involved in the transfer procedure”.

Unfortunately, old habits die hard. The previous Minister —

Mr O'Dowd: Let me correct the Member. I am not referring to the transfer meeting. I am referring to how schools will fund any substitute teachers that come in. I have made changes to that. Any school that brings in a retired teacher will have to pay the higher rate to that retired teacher out of its own costs, not out of

the central Department costs, which means that the onus is on the school and not on the Department. That will affect the employment of substitute teachers more effectively than anything.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for that. However, it is regrettable that in this document it was used as another means of trying to have a go at the failed issue of transfer, which, no doubt, we will come back to at some stage.

I appreciate that the Minister is here, given his demanding schedule over the next number of weeks. I trust that his diary commitments and his position will in no way deflect away from the serious issues that we have to address in education.

I have a specific question for the Minister. He said that he is keen to remove the obstacles to employment. He referred to the six-month experience mentioned by my colleague Mr Wells, but he did not mention the Catholic certificate, which was referred to by my colleague Mr McIlveen.

When the former deputy First Minister Mr McGuinness was asked about it in the House in relation to the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, he called it discrimination. The then deputy First Minister said that it was a "sensitive issue". If we are going to have a shared future and a level playing field in employment, we are going to have to look at discrimination against teachers who cannot apply for a job in a sector other than the maintained sector.

4.30 pm

The Education Minister then came to the closing down of institutions, and he was trying to defend the issue around St Mary's. That was raised by Basil McCrea, and I hope that I will get to it in a minute or two. He has said to me that you cannot have it both ways in relation to the funding and employment arrangements, but you cannot have it both ways and have rationalisation in education provision in the estate, but not have it in teacher training provision. If we are going to have an open, honest and transparent debate about the future of our education system, it has to go from preschool and early years right through, and it will have to include the issue of the many places in which the PGCE primary programme is provided. It is provided in more than two

institutions. Remember that the University of Ulster provides a PGCE primary programme, as does the Open University. There are, therefore, more than two institutions here with that provision.

Let us ensure that we look at the issue in the round, and let us not have any institutions that believe that the Members on that side of the House or the Members on this side will, somehow, give them a blank cheque to provide for their continued existence. We need to watch that very carefully in the weeks ahead.

I turn now to Members' comments. My colleague Mr Craig raised the issue of the cost of substitute teachers. I was never very good at maths at school, and I stand to be corrected on my calculations, which are based on the figures that have been given and which were quoted by Mr McCrea as well. We should be amazed that between 2001 and 2009, the cost of substitute teachers increased by 73% to £66 million. Previously, it was somewhere in the region of £33 million or £34 million. We have had a massive increase.

Then the Minister comes to us today and says that the introduction of a scheme would cost £20 million. He said that in the statement that he issued before the debate took place. The issuing of that statement shows that the Department was obviously exercised about the debate. It would be a lot cheaper to implement the scheme than to continue with the funding of substitute teacher provision. I took another look at the statement issued by the Department; in fact, I put my spectacles on to make sure that I read it right. This morning, in anticipation of today's debate, the Department said that it has taken a number of measures to increase employment opportunities for newly qualified teachers. It went on to say that one of those measures was to reduce the overall intake to initial teacher training courses by almost 25%.

The problem goes back to the issue that was raised by Mr McDevitt. He talked about management crisis. Here we have a Department that tells us that it has control of the issues. It can fill the Education Committee and the Chamber with all the information, week on week. We appreciate the hard work that many in the Department do to provide us with that information. However, the Public Accounts Committee at the House of Commons did not hold the view that the Department had control

of the issues. In the follow-up report on the management of substitution cover for teachers in the 2010-11 session, it stated that:

"The Committee is disappointed that the Department, employing authorities and schools have still to realise the full benefits of a £1.1 million investment in a new management information system — Resourcelink, the implementation of which had already taken considerably longer than first anticipated."

I ask the Minister or his officials to take note of that, and maybe, at some stage, they can actually inform us of the outcome and benefit of this wonderful system, about which we still have two Members across the House disputing the accuracy of figures.

At one stage, I thought that Mr McKay was the Minister. I thought that I had missed something.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Storey: He was defending the Department. He did, I have to say, say that it is wrong for teachers to have to get by on a week-to-week basis. It is not right for us in this House or any Department to have to deal with that.

I will conclude by reminding Mr McCrea that it was his colleague Mr Empey who did the deal with former Minister Caitríona Ruane on the intake numbers at St Mary's. If he wants to have a discussion about the figures, he should talk to Mr Empey, who will give him the facts.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Just to clarify, I did call Mr Storey as the Chair of the Education Committee. I now acknowledge that he is speaking in his capacity as a private Member.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the number of newly qualified teachers leaving full-time study without employment, or with little prospect of it; and calls on the Minister of Education, in conjunction with the Minister for Employment and Learning, to address the situation.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Before you bring the matter to Adjournment, I want to make sure that my correction is noted. As was pointed out by Mr Maskey, in the earlier debate, I quoted from the paper produced by the Northern Ireland Audit Office on 26 May 2010, 'The Management

of Substitution Cover for Teachers: Follow-up Report'. For the record, that was corrected by Mr Maskey, and I want to make sure that that is noted.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That is not really a point of order, but you have put it on the record.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Schools: Holywood

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the Adjournment topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. The Minister will have 10 minutes to respond. All other Members who are called to speak will have six minutes.

Mr Dunne: I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Holywood and Redburn Primary Schools.

I am grateful for the opportunity to propose the Adjournment topic today. I am glad that the Minister and Dr Farry are in the Chamber. They are both welcome, and I appreciate their giving their time to listen to the debate.

The issue of new school buildings in Holywood has been ongoing for many years. There is widespread feeling within the community, and they long to see some degree of clarity and assurance around the future of schools in Holywood.

There is genuine concern from all levels regarding the future of the four schools concerned. It is vital that those schools get some indication of their future in order for them to maintain their quality of education as they plan for the future.

The fact that the combined current enrolment of those schools is almost 1,000 pupils is testament to the importance of those schools in their communities. That is highlighted by the reality that they span all three levels of education, affecting children from the age of three to the age of 18, the latter being school leavers seeking to take the next step in their lives.

Holywood has four schools that are in poor condition: Holywood and Redburn Primary Schools; Priory Integrated College; and Holywood Nursery School. All those buildings are well over 50 years old. Each school operates in substandard conditions, with poor heating and lighting and outdated facilities. At present, none of the schools has any outdoor

sports facilities; such a basic provision has been denied them.

The Department of Education identified some years ago the need to do something about the fact that two primary schools in one town are both undersubscribed, faced with similar challenges and having to operate in basic facilities. Combining the schools makes good economic sense, and the provision of a new building will result in significant savings in running costs. Various options for sites were examined, and the Priory Integrated College site was identified as the best location for a newbuild of the combined primary school. That is the proposal progressed by the board to date.

Priory Integrated College is a popular facility with 509 pupils enrolled for this academic year; they come from north Down, east Belfast, Strangford and beyond. The Department of Education set the enrolment at 450 pupils, and that has been exceeded. The college continues to broaden educational experiences for its students, and it shares study facilities with its neighbour, Sullivan Upper grammar school. Priory College is in a very poor condition, and the proposal is to provide a purpose-built new facility at the site of Redburn Primary School. That is sorely needed to replace the second-rate building in which the young people are educated. Such is the condition of the roof that a major repair must be made this year at a cost of £750,000, as there is regular ingress of water through the roof, which puts at risk the health and safety of pupils and staff.

Recently, I was contacted by a parent whose daughter had started P1 at Holywood Primary School, having been told that the building was unfit for purpose and that the new school would be built. That pupil has now moved to Priory College, is in year 9 and is likely to spend the rest of her school career in the old buildings, which, her parents had been told, were substandard.

The need for proper nursery provision in Holywood is also recognised by the Department, and there is a proposal to build a new nursery school on the site of the existing Holywood Primary School. One part of that site would be required, and the remainder could be sold for housing in what is a prime residential location.

The people of Holywood and beyond have waited many years for the new project; a lot of preparation has gone into it. There is much

merit in the proposal, not least given the success and the high standards that all those schools have attained over the years. The four schools involved have already been through extensive design and procurement processes, including consultation with all stakeholders and interested parties. The planning process has progressed, again with extensive consultation, and, since last year, planning permission has been in place for the build of the three new schools. The proposal was to start the build programme last spring, and the project was to run as a single contract, with the building of the three schools to proceed in three phases.

I urge the Minister to provide funding for the three new schools project in Holywood, end the long-running dilemma of children being educated in substandard buildings and provide those children with modern, fit-for-purpose facilities to meet the requirements of the twenty-first century.

Mr Cree: I am pleased to be here to support my colleagues. People are used to representatives from Holywood complaining about how badly they are done by, but I must say that, in this particular case, those representatives are 100% right.

Mr Dunne outlined the project and I underscore that. As a part of that project, moneys will be generated from the sale of sites that will be redundant.

The scheme is innovative and presents a holistic solution to education in Holywood; however, it is another *déjà-vu* experience. We have been here before. I dug out my file to have a look at it. On 13 November 2007, we had an Adjournment debate on Priory Integrated College, Holywood.

We had another debate in March 2010. In July 2010, the Department of Education revealed its new school building plan, and we were delighted to see that Priory Integrated College was part of that plan. However, the then Minister advised that there was no guarantee that those schools would be built, because there was not enough money. Extra funding was required.

4.45 pm

In January 2011, the then Minister announced that, as part of her Department's budget for 2011-12 to 2014-15, the Holywood project would not go ahead. She had taken the unusual

step of transferring budget capital to revenue to cover the Department's operating expenses. Since then — again, Gordon Dunne mentioned this — we have faced the spectre of high maintenance costs for the schools, particularly for Priory College, which is a classic case of what happens when plans for replacement buildings are deferred.

I believe that a new roof is required, and I was a bit shocked to learn that a figure of £700,000 was quoted. That is only the start of the repairs, and common sense dictates that, although capital resources have been diverted to revenue to meet ongoing operational costs, those operational costs by way of maintenance are now proving to be absolutely unacceptable. Surely it must make more sense to “recapitalise” the revenue costs that are being spent on maintenance and do the job right. I support the project and urge that we get on with it as quickly as possible, because it will be money saved in the end.

Dr Farry: I wish to clarify that I speak as a Back-Bench Member. I also declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Priory Integrated College. First, I congratulate Gordon Dunne for securing the Adjournment debate. We will put down to the youthful enthusiasm of a new Member the pursuit of a path that has been well beaten, with at least two separate Adjournment debates on the topic having taken place previously, one of which I tabled.

Mr Weir: With the best will in the world to the Member, I am not sure how much youth is involved in this, as he seems to be of a similar age to the buildings about which he is complaining. I can, however, testify to the enthusiasm.

Dr Farry: Indeed. He is not as old as he looks, by the way.

I sparked a debate back in 2007, and it was one that Peter Weir sparked again in 2010. Gordon Dunne set out well the context to all this and the urgency in proceeding with the scheme. Indeed, Leslie Cree spoke about some of the more recent history. However, it is worth stressing that the scheme has seen two false dawns, and, in that respect, the announcements that were made in the past and then cancelled have certainly added to the very strong sense of frustration in Holywood, the wider north Down community and, indeed, east Belfast.

It is worth referencing the fact that the issue goes back as far as March 2006, when the then direct rule Minister with responsibility for education, Angela Smith, announced that £8.7 million would be available for the redevelopment of the schools in Holywood. The project was put on hold shortly thereafter as a result of the Bain review, which, in turn, led to the sustainable schools policy from the Department of Education. Of course, the irony is that, having been put on hold, the actual review strengthened the case for redevelopment in Holywood, because it was a model of best practice for the Department's evolving policy. However, in some respects, the review knocked the thing back and, in some ways, proved fatal to the scheme's progression.

Shortly after the Bain review was announced, the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) confirmed that it believed that the project was viable and that it reflected the best practice set out in the review. The current Minister's predecessor, Caitríona Ruane, visited the school in, I think, June 2007, and she clearly was impressed by the need to go ahead with the scheme, so much so that she announced its go-ahead once again in February 2008.

However, that proved to be a false dawn, and we are now into the more recent history that Leslie Cree set out. I also want to stress at this stage that what is happening in Holywood is potentially a very good news story in respect of how we should look at education in the future.

I recognise the need for rationalisation of the school estate in Northern Ireland. We have too many school buildings. We need to focus more on direct services for pupils, and what is happening here will facilitate that. First of all, we have Priory College, which is an integrated school, and Holywood Primary School, Redburn Primary School and Holywood Nursery School all have very diverse intakes. They are maximising their appeal to the community. I believe that integrated schools are the most viable financially, economically, socially and educationally.

Priory College is oversubscribed. It is right at its limit in respect of places, and people are being turned away from it. The irony is that the Department caps the number of pupils in Priory College, and there is clearly unmet demand

for that school in the area, which proves the viability of moving ahead with the scheme.

It is also worth stressing again that, at secondary level, Priory is very much embedded in the community. It is part and parcel of the wider learning partnerships that are evolving in the north Down area. It has good links with the community and the wider business sector. Therefore, it is very much a model of best practice in those aspects of evolving educational policy. Indeed, there is potential for work to be carried out with North Down Borough Council over shared sporting facilities. That is another potential example of joined-up government that we have not yet captured because we have been unable to move ahead with this project.

In conclusion, it is worth reflecting on the importance of the project to the community. There is overwhelming support for it not only in Holywood but much wider afield. The schools, particularly the secondary school, have a very wide catchment area, but they are not sucking demand from other schools. Indeed, the integrated schools in the wider vicinity — Strangford College and Lagan College — are oversubscribed. Therefore, there is clearly unmet demand in that area that we are not capturing.

We need to rationalise the school estate for the future. The scheme is very much in line with where we should be going and where the Department wants to go, and I urge the Minister to listen very clearly to what Members have said and to take it forward at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Easton: I welcome the opportunity to once again speak on this important matter involving education in my constituency of North Down. This is the third time that we have had an Adjournment debate on the issue, and it is possible that we could have another three debates on it before we get it resolved.

The proposal to build a new 450-place post-primary school at the Redburn site, to demolish the old Priory College building and to construct a new 21-classroom primary school at the Priory College site, as well as a new nursery school at the Holywood Primary School site, is considered the best way to ensure the necessary educational provision for pupils currently attending controlled provision in Holywood and for those likely to attend in the future. Therefore, it is recommended for acceptance.

As far back as March 2006, the then Education Minister Angela Smith announced a £380 million investment for school building programmes. Contained in that announcement was the acceptance of the proposal that this debate is about. The proposal was somehow subject to review in accordance with the Bain report. Nevertheless, in March 2007, the then Education Minister, Maria Eagle, stated:

"I would like the remaining assessments for the schemes on hold completed with the relevant authorities within the next two months to see whether there is a strong case for the schemes to proceed."

At the end of March 2007, the SEELB asked the Department of Education for clarification on what additional information it required in order to allow the delayed projects to be released. In May 2007, the Department responded to the South Eastern Education and Library Board raising concerns over the number of pupils attending Priory college. Later in May the board responded, and the Department accepted that the project met all the criteria set out in the Bain report. However, in September 2007, the Department raised yet more concerns regarding the religious balance of the school, whether parents supported the move to the Redburn site and how developments at other schools would impact on Priory college.

The board responded in the same month. The Minister acknowledged that the school was below the threshold determined by Bain but stated that if the school was providing a high standard of service the threshold did not necessarily have to be met.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Given the slightly bizarre situation created when the numbers at Priory were artificially capped below the Bain threshold, does the Member agree that that made it impossible, on the face of it, for the school to prove that it could meet the Bain threshold and that the fact that the college is having to turn people away proves that it is more than capable of meeting that threshold?

Mr Easton: Yes, I totally accept that; it is a very good point. On a visit to the school in May 2007, at my request, the Minister said that she was impressed by the good work of the principal and the staff, as well as the evidence of commitment to the delivery of high educational attainment. She added that she hoped that a decision would be made on the application

as soon as possible but said that she did not have the development plans for the school in front of her. The board, however, said that the Department had sufficient information in its possession to make a decision. Five years later, we are still waiting.

The question that comes immediately to mind is where did the money go for that plan, which was announced by the then Education Minister, Ms Smith, back in 2006. The delay is completely unacceptable. I therefore call on the Minister to act on this, to provide clarification on the matter and to announce a start date as soon as possible.

Mr Weir: When you are the fifth Member from a constituency to speak in an Adjournment debate, there is great difficulty in finding anything novel or fresh to say, particularly when, as has been indicated, it is the third opportunity that Members have had to debate the issue in the Assembly. I will, however, endeavour not to fall into that trap. I have a certain sympathy for Mr Agnew, who has to follow this.

Members referred to the earlier debates on the issue and to the fact that this is the third occasion on which it has been debated in the Assembly. That is a signal of how seriously Members are taking the issue and of the determination of Members from across the political spectrum in north Down to push ahead with the project. It is also a signal to the Minister, whoever may hold that office, and the Department that people will simply not give up on this, because it is felt to be of benefit to the people, particularly those in Hollywood.

As indicated, we have a situation in the Hollywood education system. One of the key points is that the issue affects a wide spectrum, from those of preschool age to teenagers. We have first-rate students, teachers and education, but children are unfortunately operating in third- and fourth-rate classrooms and schools. It is high time that we dealt with that structural issue. The scheme is very innovative. There has been a lot of talk about the various problems, and I think that everyone will acknowledge the problems facing the education system. The proposal is novel because, as I think Stephen Farry indicated, it very much embraces the way forward in the future. It goes beyond one age group and one section of education, because it includes the integrated sector at Priory, two primary schools and a nursery school. It

is, to use a phrase that was used already, a holistic solution to the problems of education in Holywood. In many ways, the frustrating thing is that, because this is like some form of jigsaw whereby all the pieces need to be put in place for it to succeed, the overall project requires a degree of advance.

My colleague Alex Easton and others indicated the concern about artificial barriers being put in place. Indeed, the numbers have sometimes been questioned. All those barriers have been overcome, but there has been this unusual situation where the college has suffered at times because of the cap. I am sure that all my colleagues have been inundated over various summers, when the secondary school intake is happening, by parents who have not been able to get their children into Priory because there is simply not a place. There is a concern that there is a high level of pressure on school places in north Down as a whole.

The opportunity for a new school would help to alleviate that, and, indeed, the removal of the cap would alleviate that.

5.00 pm

Mr Cree: The Member, quite rightly, refers to his frustration about that project. He touches on the fact that all the secondary schools in north Down are fully booked. Many north Down residents have to go further afield to get a place, possibly even as far away as Newtownabbey, as has been suggested. That is crazy. The situation is similar in the primary sector. Does the Member agree with that?

Mr Weir: I agree completely. There is particular pressure on the secondary sector. That is why the scheme is needed. In that regard, north Down tends to differ from most other areas. As the proposer of the topic for debate indicated, at primary level, with regard to ongoing spend, there is spare capacity in Holywood Primary School and Redburn Primary School. We are told constantly about the number of school places that are available. I think that everyone would acknowledge the problem. This is an opportunity to bring those two schools together, and it is a very sensible solution.

Although we appreciate that there are pressures on the capital budget, clearly, in the long run, it would make economic sense for the project to go ahead. That would make more economic sense than to simply carry on trying

desperately to patch up existing schools. If we were, quite frankly, left in the situation of not making the most efficient use of two undersubscribed primary schools that would make one very strong primary school, we would simply be throwing away money fairly constantly. It also makes broader sense where surplus land is concerned, because there is real need for housing in Holywood. It could bring in revenue and could help to alleviate some social problems, such as housing pressures. Therefore, it is an all-round win-win solution.

Reassessment is needed. I suspect that the Minister will tell us about the financial pressures that exist. I am sure that we all accept that. However, the matter should be given a degree of priority and certainty. Re-examination of the capital budget is needed. Perhaps a certain amount of money is at times wasted on maintenance that could be directed towards capital. It has been indicated that the Minister's predecessor, unfortunately, moved in the opposite direction. Due to the pressures that were imposed from across the water, most Departments and Ministers shifted towards trying to move money from resources into capital because that was where there was the biggest gap. Unfortunately, the Department of Education moved in the opposite direction.

No special favours are being sought for Holywood. The people of Holywood are simply looking for reasonable facilities and to be treated with equality and equity. I urge the Minister to give that greater priority and to move ahead so that the four-school scheme, which everyone can embrace and which will benefit not only Holywood but the education system of Northern Ireland, can finally be realised.

Mr Storey: Members might wonder why I have stayed to take part in a debate that does not particularly relate to my constituency. The general topic is important to me, not only as Chairperson of the Committee for Education but as a Member of the House, and I speak now as a private Member. I commend my colleague, who has grey hair and less of it — I refer to comments that were made in the previous debate — for securing the Adjournment debate.

This is a serious issue for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that we have gone round the issue of capital projects time and time again. I was just looking through some old papers, and I noted that, when the previous

Minister of Education came to the House on 29 June 2010 to discuss the review of capital projects, which I will come to in a minute or two, the now deputy First Minister and Minister of Education said, referring to my behaviour:

“That reflects badly not only on him but on the Committee. I assure the House that if the Chairperson of a Committee from my party were to behave like that, they would no longer be a Chairperson”. — [Official Report, Bound Volume 54, p81, col 1].

That is probably why he is now Minister of Education. However, I will not behave badly today. I thank the Minister for the way in which he has engaged over the past number of weeks on a variety of issues. He has created a better environment and atmosphere for us to have difficult discussions and make difficult decisions.

I want to focus on the issue of capital projects, which impinges on the issues in Mr Dunne’s constituency and the schools to which we referred — namely, Priory Integrated College and Hollywood Primary School. The Department published the investment delivery plan (IDP). The difficulty that was created when that investment delivery plan for schools and youth services was brought into the public domain was that every school in the plan thought that the day had dawned and that the Department had eventually — through planning, foresight, knowledge and engagement with all the sectors and all schools — come up with a comprehensive road map that would at some stage bring about the delivery of its particular project. For example, Priory Integrated College was classified as a design and build category B project. The estimated completion date for that was 2011-12. The Hollywood Primary School project was due to be completed in 2012-13 and was also a design and build. Here we come to the problem with the investment delivery plan. The previous Minister decided that she would review capital projects, which she said would give us clarity on the issue. She said:

“the Department will be producing very clear criteria for capital projects, and, at the appropriate time, I will provide those criteria to the Committee.”

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We have to keep to the subject of the Adjournment debate.

Mr Storey: I appreciate that, Mr Deputy Speaker. To date, we have not seen clear criteria. That is why Priory Integrated College and Hollywood

Primary School would like to know where they are in relation to the overall plan. Where are they in relation to the capital projects? The previous Minister categorised the projects. Are they compliant, partially compliant or non-compliant?

I am aware that the Minister will make a statement to the House later this month. He is aware of my concerns, particularly around the controlled sector and, for Mr Farry’s information, the integrated sector, which I raised in correspondence with the Minister. Those sectors are a reality of our school estate.

In moving to make decisions, I want to say publicly and on record in the House that it will be a retrograde step if any sector is given or is seen to be given priority over another. There must be equity and fairness, so that, when schools such as Hollywood Primary School and Priory Integrated College and their boards of governors look at the decisions that have been made, they can say that they understand the rationale, understand the decision that was made and do not feel left out because someone else has taken the money to do the project.

I commend the Member who secured the debate and wish him well in getting further progress on the issue.

Mr O’Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, Mr Deputy — I mean, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Apologies; I am trying to work out my own title. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Uasal Dunne as an diospóireacht a thabhairt chun tosaigh inniu.

I thank Mr Dunne for securing this debate on the proposed capital build project for Hollywood, as it affords me an opportunity to address Members’ concerns about the progress of the newbuilds for Priory Integrated College, Hollywood and Redburn primary schools and Hollywood Nursery School. Today’s debate allows me to highlight the significant challenges and very tough decisions that my Department faces in light of the reduced capital allocation. I recognise the difficult conditions that the principal, staff and pupils at Priory Integrated College, Hollywood Primary School, Redburn Primary School and Hollywood Nursery School currently have to endure. Unfortunately, the Hollywood schools, as Members will be aware, are not unique in that respect.

Cloisim a bhfuil le rá ag daoine inniu agus iad buartha faoi na ceithre scoil in Ard Mhic Nasca. Tuigim an difríocht mhór a dhéanann scoil nua ar bith do na páistí, do na múinteoirí agus don phobal ar fad.

I hear the concerns expressed today about the four schools in Holywood, and I am acutely aware that the building of any new school makes a significant difference not only to the children but to the teachers and wider community. As Minister of Education, I aim to put the best interests of children and young people at the centre of my considerations. They deserve to be educated in comfortable, safe, modern schools. However, the education budget and the Executive Budget highlight significant reductions in the capital resources for education over the next four years.

The IDP list, referred to by the Member opposite, was published a number of years ago. I accept his analysis that it sent out a clear signal to the listed schools and created a high expectation that, as the Member put it, the dawn had come. The new budgetary reality means that I have difficult decisions to make. I currently have 52 projects, including those on the IDP list, and about 100 other schools that have since applied for rebuilds. I am considering how to make best use of the scarce resources available to me for capital investment in the education sector. To support an area-based approach to planning and a sustainable schools policy, I will seek to establish the robust criteria that the Member called for. No decisions have been made at this time, so it is not possible to advise when or if any specific project will go ahead.

My Department's key priorities are to raise standards for all and to close the gap in performance between the highest and lowest achievers. The delivery of high-quality education is dependent on a network of successful and viable schools. In view of the significant reduction to the capital allocation for education, the current pattern of school provision cannot be sustained. Mr Farry referred to the school estate: in the absence of significant reshaping, resources will be spread ever more thinly over too many schools. Over the next few years, schools' budgets will come under increasing pressure, with deficits increasing in many schools.

I must ensure that we develop a planning and investment process that supports sustainable schools. I need to ensure that any available

capital funds are deployed on a strategic and prioritised basis to address the most pressing needs across the school estate. My Department's sustainable schools policy aims to achieve the network of schools that we need. However, we need to increase the pace at which we implement it. There is a clear need to reshape provision so that the limited resources available are distributed over fewer, larger schools that are sustainable for the longer term. We need to move to a smaller number of sustainable schools delivering a broad and balanced curriculum that supports children, society and the economy.

I have no doubt that the circumstances and scenarios of the individual projects that Members presented to me today are factual. However, I am not in a position today to indicate whether those projects will or will not go ahead. I have informed the Speaker's Office — I believe that the Committee for Education has also been informed — that I will make a comprehensive statement to the Assembly next week. In that, I will set out in clear detail the future direction across a wide range of educational issues, including the capital build programme, the sustainable schools policy and how we work within the limited financial resources currently available.

I want to be able to work in a planned way towards year 4 of the education budget. If we do not take the necessary decisions, we will be in crisis mode by year 3 or 4 of the budget, and I have no wish or intention to lead the Department of Education or any school in that direction.

I regret that I am not able to give Members a firm commitment on their projects today. However, I can assure them that, following next Monday's statement, a clear pathway will be laid out and that managing authorities, boards of governors and so on will be informed of the way ahead. I accept that he was speaking as a private Member in this debate, but, as the Chairperson of the Education Committee called for, a clear pathway for the future will be set out for all schools from that point onwards.

Adjourned at 5.15 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 26 September 2011

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Aquaculture and Marine

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development wishes to make a statement to the House.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá fáilte romaibh. With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement, in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998, regarding the recent meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in aquaculture and marine sectoral format. The meeting was held in the NSMC joint secretariat offices in Armagh on Monday 4 July 2011. Nelson McCausland and I represented the Executive, and the Dublin Government were represented by the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Pat Rabbitte TD. The statement has been agreed with Minister McCausland, and I make it on behalf of us both.

The Council welcomed a progress report on the work of the Loughs Agency, which was presented by its chairperson, Tarlach O Crosain, and its chief executive, Derick Anderson. In response to the report, Ministers at the meeting welcomed the view that the agency's regulation of fishing activity was having a positive impact on the stock profile of native Lough Foyle oysters, with more representation of larger oysters in the fishery. They also welcomed the opening of an agency office in Greencastle in County Donegal in partnership with the local community association; the completion of new aquaria in the agency's visitor centre, Riverwatch, funded jointly with the Tourist Board; and the completion of amenity sites at Mill Bay and Narrow Water, which, again, was supported by

the Tourist Board as part of the wider Mourne coastal route.

We noted the approval and progress of the agency's INTERREG projects at Meadowbank to provide a ship pontoon and cruise ship quay, as well as the importance of the promise of those facilities in attracting the Clipper round-the-world challenge to Lough Foyle next year. We also noted the completion of the strategic environmental assessment on the introduction of a licensing regime to the Foyle and Carlingford areas for aquaculture and wild shellfisheries, in compliance with the relevant EU directive. We had hoped to have a paper on the Loughs Agency's corporate plan for 2011-13 and its business plan for 2011 for consideration at the meeting, but that did not prove possible. We did, however, have a discussion on progress on the development of those plans, which were subsequently approved by the NSMC at the meeting in agriculture sectoral format on 26 July.

Ministers noted the Loughs Agency's annual report, which detailed the agency's activities and achievements against its agreed 2010 targets. We also noted the draft financial statement for 2010, which, together with the annual report, will be laid before the Assembly and the Oireachtas once the financial statements have been certified by the respective Comptrollers and Auditors General.

The Council welcomed progress on the delivery of the agency's legislation implementation plan and approved two sets of regulations: the Foyle Area (Angling Permits) Regulations 2011, and the Foyle Area and Carlingford Area (Prohibition of Unlicensed Fishing) (Prescribed Species) Regulations 2011. We also noted that further Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission regulations will require NSMC approval during 2011 and 2012.

The Council approved for a further year, to July 2012, a procedure to support the Loughs Agency in dealing, through regulations, with emergencies such as pollution incidents. The procedure would allow for approval of emergency regulations outside the scheduled programme of meetings of the NSMC where the agency's immediate intervention is necessary. We were happy to hear that the Loughs Agency has not had to operate that procedure, which was first approved by the NSMC on 20 July 2009.

Ministers agreed that the agency should initiate a process for the appointment of the third Foyle and Carlingford Advisory Forum, in line with best practice and ensuring best value for money. It was reported to us that the term of the current advisory forum, which has 48 representatives from the local areas and local interest groups, was due to end in September this year. Although it had proved an important tool for communicating with the stakeholders in the Foyle and Carlingford catchment areas, there is an opportunity to refresh and refocus the forum with new membership.

Ministers approved the arrangements for the payment of financial assistance through a small grants scheme. The sustainable development fund will be part of the Loughs Agency's implementation of the marine tourism development strategy. Through that scheme, the agency will encourage applications from the public, private, community and voluntary sectors to support angling development, conservation and protection of the fisheries and marine tourism in the Foyle and Carlingford catchment areas. Finally, we agreed that the next meeting in the aquaculture and marine sectoral format will take place in October or November 2011.

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I thank the Minister for her statement. She mentioned that a strategic environmental assessment relating to the introduction of a licensing regime for aquaculture and wild shell-fisheries had been carried out. Will she give us more detail about what the assessment revealed and what the next steps are?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat. As the Loughs Agency reported at the meeting, the strategic and environmental assessment on the introduction of the licensing regime to the Foyle and Carlingford areas for aquaculture and wild shell-fisheries is in compliance with the EU directive. It was

completed by AECOM on behalf of the Loughs Agency. The environmental report has been completed and publicly consulted on, with 33 formal responses recorded. Those have all been considered, and the final environmental statement was completed around Christmas 2010.

In addition to the work that has been done on the strategic assessments, the agency, in tandem with the strategic environmental assessment, has been engaged in the development of an overall strategy specifically for regulation and development of aquaculture and shell-fisheries, and proposed mechanisms to bring forward an environmentally sustainable system of management. In addition, appropriate assessments, in accordance with article 6 of the habitats directive, have been undertaken. Hopefully, that updates the Chairperson of the Committee on the position.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. The Minister will be well aware of the importance of tourism in trying to sustain some economic growth and, in particular, the exploitation of our natural resources for tourism and the beauty of our landscape. In that context, I ask her for some more detail on the amenity sites at Mill Bay that are part of the Mourne coastal route, which was discussed at the meeting. Will she give us some more detail on those sites, how it is intended to use them, how much it will cost and whether that programme will roll on to other sites as well?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The agency reported at the meeting that the projects at Mill Bay and Narrow Water have now been completed. The Member will be aware that those projects included landscaping, replanting, and the renewal of furniture, bins and fencing. In addition to those projects, we heard about some others with which the agency is involved. Those include the development of two marine canoe trails and the establishment of a recognised training centre on the River Foyle. The agency has also initiated and funded a Sail in the City project as part of Foyle Days, a Derry City Council festival that gave visitors to the city and locals the opportunity to sail on the River Foyle and learn something about the sport of sailing. Those are just some practical examples of what the agency is doing. We have a marine tourism development strategy. We hope to follow that through, keep it under review and renew it when necessary.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome the fact that savings are to be found in the appointment of the Foyle and Carlingford Advisory Forum. Will she give us some detail on how she intends to ensure value for money?

Mrs O'Neill: Like many other organisations, the agency is subject to 3% efficiency savings. It has been successful in achieving £143,000 in efficiency savings, which shows that it is working towards value for money in everything that it does.

Mrs D Kelly: I also thank the Minister for her statement. I am sure that she will agree that the work on marine matters, given that there is no border across the waters, is money well spent and that we could do a lot more collaboratively. Are there any other project applications outstanding, other than those INTERREG projects that have already been funded, on which decisions have yet to be made? Is she aware of any difficulties about match funding that may hold up applications?

Mrs O'Neill: As the Member will be aware, the INTERREG application for the ship pontoon and cruise ship quay project at Meadowbank on the River Foyle underwent its economic appraisal and has been signed off. The agency has since advised us that the tendering process for that project has been completed. The promise of those facilities was critical in attracting the Clipper Round the World yacht race in 2012, which will be a major attraction for the Foyle area, and we are delighted that that has been achieved. The agency has also advised us that the value-for-money assessments for other INTERREG projects are nearing finalisation. Those include an angling project at Mellon beat, a visitor centre at Malin Head, and a water-based leisure project at Gribben Quay on the River Foyle. Further value-for-money assessments are also being drafted for three more projects: a visitors' service at Benone beach, an angling project on the River Foyle and visiting boat facilities on a remote Donegal island. I will have to make enquiries about match funding, but I will be happy to come back to the Member on that issue.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she tell the Assembly exactly what part the local community association will play in successfully operating the new agency office in Greencastle?

Mrs O'Neill: The office in Greencastle was established in response to stakeholders' requests that the Loughs Agency should identify a small regional office. It was established in partnership with the community association in the Greencastle area of Inishowen and took up tenancy in November 2010. A significant number of the agency's customers are based in that area. Therefore, the aim of the Greencastle office is to improve access for stakeholders. The agency believes that that will enable it to build and improve on its relationships in Inishowen. The association is vital to all that, and the establishment of the office was its idea. That will be the key to its success.

Mr Irwin: My question touches on a similar theme to that expressed by the Member for Upper Bann. When will the small grants scheme be open for applications, and is there a limit on the amount of money available through that scheme?

Mrs O'Neill: The total value of the scheme is £361,458 over three years. Funding for the scheme is contained in the Loughs Agency approved budget for 2011 and the indicative budgets for 2012 and 2013. We hope to encourage applications from public, private, community and voluntary sectors to support angling development, conservation and protection of the fisheries, and marine tourism in the Foyle and Carlingford catchments. The scheme will contribute to the protection and conservation of the Foyle and Carlingford area's shell and fin fish stocks at sustainable levels, the growth of marine tourism and the development of the catchment areas for angling and other marine tourism. I will be happy to ensure that the Member receives a copy of the details of the scheme and maximum limits for individual applications.

12.15 pm

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister update us on attacks on Loughs Agency staff?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat. Thank you for the question. It is a relevant issue. At the NSMC meeting, it was reported that there had been six attacks on agency staff up to that point. Since July, however, you will be aware from media coverage that there have been a number of attacks. It is something that I wholeheartedly condemn. I encourage anybody with information to bring it to the PSNI.

We have been successful in taking cases against those who have been involved in attacks on our staff. There have been a number of prosecutions, and I hope that that will act as a deterrent. There is a black market for salmon, and prices are high. I am sure that that is what attracts people to poaching. I condemn wholeheartedly any attacks on our staff. I will visit staff in the near future, and I want to take a delegation to meet Matt Baggott and the Justice Minister to discuss what we can do to make sure that everything is being done. Staff should be able to do their job without fear of being attacked.

Mr T Clarke: I join with other Members in thanking the Minister for her statement. You said that you hoped to view the Loughs Agency's corporate plan for 2011-13 and the business plan for 2011, but that it was not possible to view them at the time. What was the reason for that given that it was July and that we were some time into the 2011 year?

Mrs O'Neill: I am sorry. To clarify; were you asking me why it was not agreed at the NSMC meeting?

Mr T Clarke: You said in your statement that it was not possible to consider the corporate plan or business plan at the meeting. Given that it was July and that all business plans should probably have been ready by April, was any reason given as to why they were not available?

Mrs O'Neill: The agency's corporate and business plans were originally on the agenda for that meeting, and they required the approval of the two Finance Ministers. Unfortunately, that approval was not achieved before the meeting, so we had to put the matter back until the agriculture sectoral format meeting, which was a number of weeks later.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her statement. Is there any provision in the small grant scheme to allow disability and action groups to make use of it to open fishing and angling to them?

Mrs O'Neill: The scheme is open to everybody who wants to get involved and has ideas about things to take forward. It would be fantastic if people came forward to make sure that we make fishing and other water-based activities fully accessible. I welcome anybody who wants to come forward with proposals. I am not 100% sure about whether there have been

any applications to date, but I will be happy to provide that information to the Member.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also thank the Minister for her statement. Aquaculture is very important in my constituency of South Down. I see a great potential for economic growth in that sector. Will you give us an update on the current oyster fishing season?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat. Thanks for the question. The 2010-11 native oyster fishing season began on Monday 20 September 2010. Forty six vessels received licences to operate this year. That is an increase from the 2009-2010 year, which saw only 36 licences. Reported landings for the season are in the region of 112 tons, and the agency has received 58 applications for the 2011-12 season, which opened on Monday 19 September 2011.

Mr Buchanan: I also thank the Minister for her statement to the House today. My question focuses on the INTERREG projects. The Minister mentioned the importance of the promise of facilities at Lough Foyle for attracting the Clipper challenge next year, but will she inform the House of whether that will happen? It is all right to make a promise, but, when it comes to next year, will that promise become a reality and the facilities be in place for the Clipper round-the-world challenge?

Mrs O'Neill: I hope that it will be realised, and the Members for Foyle will share that hope. I thank the Member for raising that point. We need to look more seriously at marine tourism. We have a marine tourism strategy, which we need to build on and implement. Attracting that big yacht festival is key to that, and I hope that it will become a reality.

Mr Allister: Has the Loughs Agency issued any aquacultural licences for Lough Foyle? If not, is that because of a jurisdictional dispute? Does the Minister accept that the Crown Estate owns the foreshore and seabed around Northern Ireland to a distance of 12 nautical miles?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. There is a dispute, and it is one that I hope to iron out and resolve with my counterpart in the Twenty-six Counties, Minister Simon Coveney. I have spoken to him about it, and I will ensure that I make it a priority to ensure that we are able to regulate fully across that area. I hope that that answers the Member's question.

North/South Ministerial Council: Agriculture

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister has indicated that she wishes to make a second statement.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement, in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998, regarding the fifteenth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in agriculture sectoral format. The meeting was held at the Loughry campus of the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) on Tuesday 26 July. Minister Edwin Poots MLA and I represented the Executive. The Irish Government were represented by Simon Coveney TD, Minister for Agriculture, Marine and Food. The statement has been agreed with Mr Poots, and I am making it on behalf of us both.

The Council noted developments on the common agricultural policy (CAP) reform process, including publication by the EU Commission of its communication on the future of the CAP and its proposals for the next multi-annual financial framework. CAP reform will be an extremely important issue for both Departments over the next two years, as decisions will be made on the future level and shape of direct payments. I will do everything possible to get the best possible deal, and I discussed with Minister Coveney the possibility of an all-island event on CAP reform after the EU Commission publishes the CAP reform legislative proposals on 12 October.

Ministers noted that, owing to lack of progress on the World Trade Organization's Doha round of trade talks, attempts are being made to conclude a deal on a limited range of issues by the end of 2011. However, it has since become clear that even a limited deal is not achievable. Trade negotiations with the Mercosur group of South American countries continue.

The council welcomed a presentation by the two Agriculture Departments on greenhouse gas research and co-operation and on other collaborative work on research. The presentation covered trends in greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 to the present; greenhouse gas inventory development; mitigation strategies; and our involvement in the work of the Global Research Alliance (GRA), which was initiated by New Zealand and includes more than 30 member

countries. Ministers also discussed the possibility of a future all-island event on climate change.

The Council welcomed progress on the delivery of the all-island animal health and welfare strategy action plan for 2010-11, which includes joint co-operation to ensure that the strategy's aims are considered in Commission discussions on the proposals for a new EU animal health law and agreement on a methodology for future information sharing on Aujeszky's disease programmes.

Ministers noted the strategy action plan for 2011-12, including plans to scope the potential for co-operation between official laboratories in carrying out research, surveillance and testing. Ministers looked forward to receiving further updates on delivery of the strategy and emphasised their commitment to ensuring that officials progress the strategy with urgency.

The plant health and pesticides group made a presentation on its work programme, which was approved by the council. The work programme aims to develop a vision for a strategic approach to protecting plant health on the island from the risks that plant pests and diseases pose to the environment and the economy. The Council also noted ongoing co-operation in dealing with a number of outbreaks of *Phytophthora ramorum* in Japanese larch forests, and the action taken to control those outbreaks was welcomed.

The Council also approved the Loughs Agency corporate plan 2011-13 and its business plan for 2011. It recommended the budget provision for 2011 of £4-5387 million and noted indicative budgets of £4-3957 million. The key objectives for the Loughs Agency in 2011-13 will be to conserve and protect the fisheries; license and develop aquaculture; develop marine tourism and angling; and effectively and efficiently deliver on its statutory mandate and responsibilities in the Foyle and Carlingford areas.

Although rural development is a mandated topic for Council meetings, it was not discussed at our July meeting because Phil Hogan TD, Minister of the Environment, Community and Local Government was unavailable. However, looking ahead, I anticipate that we will be able to discuss a number of rural issues at the next proposed sectoral meeting, including the benefits for rural communities arising from our Departments' co-operation on the INTERREG and rural development programmes. It was

agreed that the next meeting in agriculture sectoral format will be in October 2011.

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I thank the Minister for her statement to the House, in which she made specific reference to the reform of CAP. She will know that the Committee recently published its position on that extremely important issue. She will also know that Committee members took the opportunity to make representations to the politicians in the Republic at the ploughing championship in County Kildare last week, and that we have written to our sister Committees in Wales, Scotland and Westminster.

We are aware that the Minister is working with Minister Simon Coveney in the Republic on the issue. Articulating Northern Ireland's case as widely and as frequently as possible across all the bodies and people of influence is absolutely critical. However, can the Minister give the House and me a reassurance that she will make every effort to lobby her ministerial counterparts in Wales, Scotland and, in particular, Westminster, where this battle will be fought? Will she also elaborate on her plans for the all-Ireland event to which she referred, and will she give a guarantee that she will keep the Committee fully informed on both matters?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Chair of the Committee for that question. The ploughing championship, which some Committee members were able to come to, was a fantastic event and was very successful for those Northern-based exhibitors that took part in that three-day event. I have talked to them and they thought it was great, and the trade that they did and the links that they built were fantastic.

Minister Simon Coveney will be a key person to work with in the time ahead. However, likewise, we need to work with our colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and in the Scottish and Welsh Assemblies. My officials are in daily contact with DEFRA. I asked for a meeting with Caroline Spelman, the Minister with overall responsibility, before recess but, unfortunately, that was not able to happen as it did not suit her diary. However, I will go to London to meet her on 25 October because it is vital that we use every avenue and every door that is open to us to make sure that we make a strong case for the best possible CAP at the negotiations. I have

met the Scottish Minister, and I will meet the Welsh Minister in the future.

I want to mention the MEPs' event. We decided that, given that we now have co-decision-making in Europe, MEPs will be critical in the time ahead as the CAP reform goes through the European Parliament. We thought that, after 12 October, when we have concrete EU proposals on the table, we should use all our 15 MEPs across the island to make sure that we have a co-ordinated response to CAP and that we are all out in Europe fighting the same battle, which is to get the strongest possible CAP.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Arís, gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I commend the Minister on her approach to CAP, which is to seek the broadest possible engagement and support right across these islands, rather than adopt the very narrow focus that some parties seem to wish her to adopt. That would be detrimental to the farming community here.

I want to ask about the animal health strategy. She said in her statement that both Ministers have urged officials to proceed —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Could we have a question please?

Mr Murphy: This is the question, Cheann Comhairle. They have urged officials to proceed quickly with that. Can she outline what progress has been made by officials since the NSMC meeting?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat. Following agreement of the strategy at the end of March 2010, stakeholders from across the island took part in a very successful event for animal health and welfare to discuss the roll-out of the strategy, at which EU Commissioner John Dalli was a keynote speaker. Since then, my officials have continued to work with their Dublin counterparts to progress the activities detailed in the strategy so that we can develop broadly similar animal health and welfare policies on the island.

12.30 pm

Delivery of the action plan will help us to move towards the ultimate aim of our strategy: to secure the free movement of animals across the island. The action plans for the delivery of that strategy set out the activities that are under way this year and the milestones by which they will be completed.

A practical example of co-operation is the ongoing liaison on and testing of contingency systems for disease control. If we were to have an outbreak of an epizootic disease, such as foot and mouth, one of the first actions would be the creation and publication of a map displaying affected zones. That map serves a number of key purposes, including that of providing a clear indication to the public and other stakeholders, and is, therefore, key to helping to stop the spread of disease. Such a map must be clear and consistent, irrespective of whether the territory of the two member states is affected. Therefore, as part of the contingency planning arrangements, my officials have signed a memorandum of understanding with their counterparts in the South to facilitate the production of maps of disease control zones, so that, in the event of an outbreak, we have a single, consistent map being used.

The two Departments agree that cognisance must continue to be taken of the views of stakeholders in the delivery of the strategy. So I welcome the fact that, as a direct result of agreement on the strategy, the Departments have worked closely on the development of their negotiating positions for discussions on the new EU animal health law. DAFF officials have actively raised the strategy and its aims at EU working group level.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for her statement. I note the plan for laboratories to co-operate on research, surveillance and testing and the potential that that co-operation has for financial savings. Will she give us an estimate of the savings that her Department could make as a result of that co-operation?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have those figures in my briefing for today, but I am happy to provide them to the Member. There are obvious benefits to co-operation on all that type of work. At the ploughing championships, we launched our disease surveillance report, which is an all-island report on animal disease. There are obvious benefits to be achieved from co-operation, and I will happily provide the Member with the actual figures.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her statement and draw her attention to point 8 in it. Will she outline further actions in relation to the strategy action plan for 2011-12? Will the Minister inform us whether, in scoping the potential for co-operation between official laboratories in

carrying out research, surveillance and testing, the terms of reference will include the use of universities on the island of Ireland for research and surveillance? Are there any proposals for efficiency savings in that regard?

Mrs O'Neill: All areas are subject to efficiency savings and to getting the best value for money, and I am sure that this is no different. However, we need to be careful not to compromise any disease control measures. We must make sure that we have the best possible systems and procedures in place.

We work right across the board and the island with our universities. That is key because they often have the resource, technology and expertise. So we must continue to collaborate to make sure that we have the best systems possible because disease control is obviously key to the future of our industry.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister referred in her statement to a presentation on greenhouse gas research and co-operation. Is the Minister satisfied that enough progress is being made on greenhouse gas, which is a serious issue across Northern Ireland and in the Republic?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. Yes, it is a serious issue. As we, in our respective Departments, work to grow our agrifood sector, we need to be mindful of the effects and impacts of climate change on that sector. We need to be aware of the challenges that reducing greenhouse gas emissions will present to our sector and of the amount produced by farming. We had a useful presentation from our Department and Simon Coveney's on climate change and the contribution of the agriculture sector. As I said, given that our plans are ambitious, we need to be mindful that that is factored into any strategic direction that we take for agrifood. So, climate change will have to be a key part of the strategic plan up to 2020 that I develop for agrifood.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her statement. Given that she made much ado about the all-island approach to an animal health welfare strategy and given that the Irish Republic has eradicated brucellosis, have the Minister and her Department learned of and looked at ways that we can eradicate brucellosis in Northern Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely; we are always keen to look to anybody who has good practice and has

been able to eradicate disease. We hope to be brucellosis-free by 2014, and I am happy to keep the Member and the Committee informed on that. The Member will be aware of proposals on compensation arrangements, and officials will update the Committee on that matter tomorrow.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she provide us with more detail on all-Ireland rural development issues?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. As I said in my statement, Minister Hogan was unable to attend the meeting; therefore, I cannot update the Member on any specific discussions that we had on that topic. However, I hope to discuss a number of rural issues with Minister Hogan at the next meeting, which is proposed for October. Through our Departments' co-operation, I understand that six projects have been awarded funding from the rural development measure of the INTERREG programme and that they will deliver support for rural tourism and enterprise initiatives in some of our most deprived rural communities. The co-operation aspect of the rural development programme has moved on considerably, with several local action groups actively involved in various co-operation projects. Those programmes offer very real opportunities to improve the economic and social infrastructure of rural areas, and I look forward to discussing with Minister Hogan how we can work together to deliver them.

Mr T Clarke: I thank the Minister for her statement. She referred to greenhouse gas research and various aspects relating to greenhouse gases. However, the disposal of poultry litter, which is a really live issue and an area in which her Department has failed, was not mentioned in the statement. Has the Department made any progress on the disposal of poultry litter?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that responsibility for the disposal of poultry litter sits with the Department of the Environment and not directly with my Department. I have an interest, given that the poultry sector comes under DARD. We await the Minister of the Environment's position on the way forward. I met the poultry sector a number of weeks ago, and I continue to talk and work with it as there is an Executive responsibility to meet the EU directive.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her statement, in which she referred to phytophthora ramorum.

Will she detail the work that is being taken to control the outbreaks, and will she supply details on the number and location of the outbreaks that were discussed at the meeting?

Mrs O'Neill: It is important to do all that we can to minimise the risk of phytophthora ramorum and minimise the risk of it further establishing itself in our woodlands. We have taken appropriate steps to contain the disease, which have been based on the scientific advice that we receive. Japanese larch on public and private land has been felled, and that is the best method for controlling the disease and preventing further damage. Biosecurity precautions are also in place in the infected areas to prevent further spread. During the harvesting of infected areas of Japanese larch, forest operators follow further plant health control arrangements to minimise the risk of spreading the disease from infected sites through footwear or clothing. Forest visitors are also asked to observe any signage indicating the actions that they can take to prevent the spread of the disease. Those actions include keeping to forest roads, keeping dogs on a lead and removing soil and mud from shoes before visiting other woodlands so that there is no cross-contamination.

Forest Service, in conjunction with DARD quality assurance branch, has stepped up surveillance of its forests on a countrywide basis and, as a precautionary response, has included aerial surveillance, where helicopters can clearly identify the affected areas, and ground work. Together, we need to continue to look at all those. However, the Member will be aware that a number of areas in the public and private sector have been affected, including Tollymore forest and Ballyboley forest. I am happy to provide him with a list of the individual forests.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's approach in garnering support from the Irish Government and her efforts to garner support from the Welsh and Scottish legislators to get the best deal for farmers on CAP reform. What plans does the Minister have to secure the free movement of animals within the island of Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. Full co-operation on animal health issues on the island has the potential to reduce and prevent the spread of animal diseases, facilitate trade and improve the sustainability of farming in the North. The ultimate objective of the all-island

animal health and welfare strategy is, therefore, to facilitate trade through the free movement of animals right across the island. It also works to optimise the animal health status of the island through the alignment of policies to control animal disease. I believe that the island of Ireland should be recognised internationally as a separate unit for disease control purposes and for ensuring effective traceability of livestock, in the event of a disease outbreak. Building on the work that our predecessors did in achieving the agreement of the strategy by the NSMC Ministers, I look forward to having discussions, taking that work forward and ensuring that we can secure recognition from London and Brussels.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an ráitis sin. I noticed that, in her concluding remarks, the Minister referred to working with Phil Hogan, presumably at the next meeting, on issues of mutual concern around rural development. May I suggest that included in those issues is the poor take-up or, perhaps, poor implementation of rural development projects? Will the Department also look at innovative and more creative ways of ensuring that we are not left with a situation in which funding, especially EU funding, that has been given for projects in the community is underspent?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. I have no intention of handing any money back to Europe. That is not any Department's aim. We are constantly looking at the rural development programme and at how we can improve things and listening to people who are involved in delivering the projects. I have been to many very successful projects, and we need to promote those so that other people can see what type of work can be funded. As I said, I have no intention of handing any money back to Europe. I want to keep it under review continually. If you have any ideas around how improvements can be made to the rural development programme, bring them forward. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Buchanan: I want to focus on the same issue as the previous Member: INTERREG funding and rural development programmes. I know that the Minister said that she has no intention of handing money back to Europe, but can she inform the House of what she is doing to make the process much less bureaucratic and more attractive to groups out there?

Mrs O'Neill: That issue was not discussed at NSMC, but we are continually looking at the bureaucracy and the issues around match funding and planning delays. We are continually trying to improve a number of issues. The Department has made improvements to reduce the bureaucracy, and, through speaking to local groups, I know that they recognise that. My aim is to make sure that we can spend the money, and that seems to be on target, if we can reduce the bureaucracy and any delays in the process. They are constantly under review. I hope that that clarifies the situation.

Education

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister of Education has indicated that he wishes to make a statement.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom ráiteas a dhéanamh leis an Tionól ar na pleananna agus na chéad chéimeanna eile atá agam le hoideachas a sholáthar don phobal ar a bhfreastálaíonn muid. *[Interruption.]* It appears that education is needed not only in our schools but among some of our Members.

I would like to make a statement to the Assembly on my plans to deliver the next steps in education to the community we serve. As Education Minister, my clear priority is to create an education service that ensures that all our people receive a high-quality education that enriches their lives and grows the economy respectively. The plan of action that I am setting out is framed with that and only that in mind. Since my appointment, I have reviewed where we are against that vision. I have asked a number of key questions. Is our focus right? Are our policies right? Do we deploy our resources effectively in support of these policies? Are we moving fast enough? I have posed those questions in the context of the most challenging Budget settlement in modern education history.

12.45 pm

The focus that was introduced by my predecessor was on children and young people and on promoting equality, fulfilling potential and enriching life chances through education. That focus remains absolutely the right one. We must prioritise the needs of children over institutions and make sure that it is the needs of all our young people that are to the fore.

In focusing on the needs of all children, we must start by laying the right foundations for learning in those all-important early years, and we must make sure that we support children with special educational needs (SEN). Once my Department has finalised the SEN and early years strategies, I am satisfied that we will have in place a radical and coherent set of policies that are designed to improve educational outcomes for young people and to address the root causes whenever pupils are not achieving to their full potential. With those strategies in place we will not need any new policies; rather, I intend to step up the pace of implementation

and delivery of existing policies. In particular, I want to ensure that our planning, financing and investment arrangements are aligned to support that delivery. Some of those issues should have been taken forward to ESA, and I remain optimistic that we can and will, through the political process, make progress with ESA. My conclusion, however, is that, given the scale of the challenges that are facing the education system, I need to move ahead now within existing structures to secure the necessary traction, pace and commitment to drive change.

At the core of that challenge is how we plan our provision. The Bain report of 2006 spelled out unambiguously that we have inherited a pattern of provision that is now both educationally and financially unsustainable. We have in place a sustainable schools policy, but the necessary drive and authority has not been applied to the rigorous framework that it sets out. We have too many schools that do not have the capacity to give children the broad and rich educational experience that they deserve — schools that, in some cases, have lost the confidence of the parents, pupils and communities that they were built to serve.

Our latest enrolment figures show that our schools have almost 85,000 spare places, which is equivalent to more than 150 empty schools. One third of our 863 primary schools have fewer than 100 children enrolled, one fifth of our 217 post-primary schools have fewer than 400 pupils, and 50 of our 172 sixth forms have fewer than 100 pupils enrolled. However, the sustainable schools policy is not simply a numbers game, and schools will be measured against the six principles of that policy.

Without a determination to deliver change, we set those schools an impossible task in the delivery of a curriculum that is fit for the 21st century. That is no longer acceptable or affordable, and provision of that nature limits opportunities for young people and dissipates scarce resources. I am resolved that we will move and move urgently to reshape our estate to support our policies and guarantee high-quality education to all our young people. That will involve difficult, sometimes unpopular but necessary decisions. However, politics is about making a positive difference and not about seeking short-term popularity, and I, for one, will not be deterred from the course of action that I set out today.

I also want to make sure that, in planning our provision, we future-proof it as much as possible. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to be quiet whenever statements are being made or whenever another Member has the Floor.

Mr O'Dowd: We have a duty to plan and invest to meet the needs of our children, not the demand of the institutions that we have inherited.

I want to set out an urgent programme of actions to ensure that, in future, we have in place a pattern of education provision that will deliver the high-quality education that future generations deserve; that is, a system that delivers educational excellence for all. First, I am asking the managing authorities to conduct an immediate viability audit to identify clearly schools that are currently evidencing stress in remaining educationally viable. Key criteria will be enrolments, standards and financial viability. I have asked for that to be submitted before the end of the year, along with short-term and long-term proposals to safeguard the education of the children who currently attend those schools.

Secondly, in the absence of the ESA, it is clear that we can no longer delay the strategic planning of the schools estate. We cannot continue to drive up standards without an effective, planned, sustainable and affordable pattern of schools. Without such a pattern, we cannot provide a broad and balanced curriculum. The five education and library boards already have a statutory duty to secure sufficient school places to meet the needs of children in their area. Therefore, I am commissioning the boards to work in close conjunction with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), which has a statutory responsibility in relation to planning Catholic maintained schools, to co-ordinate a strategic exercise, based on each board area, to shape the future pattern of education delivery. As part of that process, there will be close consultation with the other sectors. That exercise will be fundamentally based on the sustainable schools policy and steered by detailed guidance from my Department. It is a critical exercise; I expect it to be based on partnership and to keep the needs of children and young people paramount.

In commissioning that work, I recognise that we are not starting from scratch. Boards have put much thinking and work into this. The Catholic sector has the fruits of its post-primary

review to input. It is important, however, that a comprehensive strategic approach which covers the needs of all children is adopted within the financial parameters that flow from the Budget. I want to see the first phase of that work completed within six months of its formal commission by my Department. The work will have an early focus on post-primary provision.

I have talked about schools that are too small or too empty, but I am conscious that many oversubscribed schools enjoy the confidence of parents, pupils and communities. The guidance from my Department will make it clear that plans should allow for popular, oversubscribed schools to grow further. However, that will be on the basis that the schools involved accept the responsibility to provide a curriculum that meets the needs of all the pupils whom they accept. That should be self-evident, but it is not always the case. Sadly, I hear too often about pupils who are politely asked to leave a school because they do not meet its needs. That is an untenable situation: schools must meet the needs of pupils, not the other way round. In future, the pattern of provision and investment must and will be dictated by the needs of education in the 21st century and an economy that requires a diverse, educated workforce with an array of skills.

Through the guidance, I will particularly seek to enable popular post-primary schools to accommodate their own pupils as well as those who seek to transfer from 11-16 schools. I will allow flexibility on both counts and will ask the inspectorate to closely monitor retention rates and what schools are doing to meet the needs of every child and to be vigilant for any differential approach.

As young people move through school, it is critical that they are able to access a choice of courses that meets their needs, interests and career aspirations. Therefore, I intend to move quickly to trigger the legislation to put the entitlement framework on a statutory basis. The provisions relating to Key Stage 4 and post-16 education will be commenced by my Department by 16 December to take effect from September 2013. That is the timescale that schools have been expecting and that many have been working to meet. I recognise, however, that progress with the entitlement framework must be set in the reality of the Budget settlement. I have decided, therefore, to introduce a phased implementation of the full

entitlement framework, which will remain at the original level of 24 courses at Key Stage 4 and 27 at post-16. I see the case for specifying a slightly lower minimum on both fronts to start with, and, therefore, I intend to specify an 18- and 21-course requirement in 2013, rising to 21 and 24 respectively in 2014 and to 24 and 27 respectively in 2015. I also recognise the need to give greater clarity to schools on what constitutes general and applied courses, so that schools can discharge their obligations to offer pupils a wide and balanced entitlement with at least one third of their courses general and one third applied. My Department will address that urgently. It is important that all schools involved are left in no doubt that this is not about ticking boxes but about putting the needs and aspirations of pupils first. The underlying presumption is that courses offered reflect quality and coherence, and, again, the inspectorate will monitor that closely as a priority task.

Next, I want to move from planning for sustainability to how we ensure that we invest for sustainability. The common funding scheme dictates how funds are allocated to schools. I am not satisfied that the scheme adequately supports and is consistent with our policy objectives. That relates to primary and post-primary funding. I do not believe that the current system sufficiently takes account of TSN in our drive for sustainable schools. Therefore, I am commissioning a major review of the scheme, with a brief to ensure that it is fit for purpose in our drive for a sustainable estate. This is a major exercise, which I want to see completed to allow for consultation and implementation of eventual decisions for the 2013-14 school year. In taking it forward, I am making it clear that I want schools to continue to be able to decide how best to use the funding they receive, but I also want schools to be more accountable for the outcomes that their pupils achieve.

The other leg of investment is capital. It is clear that the approach to capital investment in education in the past lacked the necessary strategic dimension, and that was recognised by my predecessor, who began to change that. I have stated previously — indeed, I think it has been repeated by all parties — that we have too many schools and the current pattern of provision is neither educationally viable nor financially sustainable going forward. Action is needed to restructure our schools estate to ensure that it is capable of meeting the needs

of our children in the future, that it is affordable and that it represents the best and most effective use of taxpayers' money.

I must be certain that we are investing our resources in the right schools. It is my intention to set out clear criteria for access to capital investment in the near future. Those criteria will be founded on the sustainable schools policy and the requirement that any proposal is founded in an area plan agreed by the sectors and approved by my Department. Linked to that, I will put in place a new, explicit process for capital planning. Any projects involved will have a full understanding at any time of their status, and progress on all proposals for newbuild capital investment projects will have to be tested through that process.

In taking forward that new approach, I have given careful consideration to how to deal with the remaining projects in the investment delivery plan (IDP). I need to be assured that the projects are consistent with the overall plans for the area that they are situated in. Indeed, looking at the projects that were in the initial IDP, it is worth noting that two of the primary schools originally proposed have actually closed and a further 12 have seen their enrolment fall well below the minimum set in the sustainable schools policy. Nine of the 34 post-primary schools on the IDP list have also seen their enrolment fall below the minimum recommended. That reinforces my belief that, if we are to have confidence in future priorities for capital investment, those projects must be critically assessed as part of the area planning exercise. They can, of course, come forward again, if, after testing against the new processes being established, they remain the highest priority in the context of the area plan and against the new criteria. In addition to the remaining projects in the investment delivery plan, the further 100 or so projects that have been logged with the Department by school managing authorities will be tested as part of the area planning exercise.

I assure the Assembly that this has not been an easy decision, but I am convinced that it is the right decision. Only by doing this can I be assured that limited resources are invested in the highest-priority projects, which will ensure that we are building the right type of schools, in the right place and of the right size to meet the future needs of children and young people.

It will be a matter for the boards and the CCMS to work with other sectors to develop area plans and to consider all potential proposals in the context of the vision for education provision in the area. They will need to ensure that any project coming forward to my Department has a contribution to make to future provision in the area, that projects are appropriately sized and located and that they are viable and sustainable in the long term. In addition, it is clear that we simply do not have the resources to look to a newbuild solution on every occasion. We need to look more at the existing estate for innovative solutions. I am not ruling out newbuilds in the future, but we need a more imaginative and flexible approach.

1.00 pm

The core objective of my Department is to raise education standards. We have made progress with our school improvement policy. Its formal intervention process has enabled schools that are falling short to address their failings and to respond with improvement. The focus, however, must be on children and young people. There will be cases where, despite the goodwill of all, there is no capacity to improve, and as a result, parents and pupils are already voting with their feet. Linked to the initial viability audits that I have commissioned, I will amend the formal intervention process to incorporate an immediate viability assessment where provision in a school is found to be unsatisfactory. That will ensure that in cases where a school is no longer viable, quick action can be taken to find satisfactory alternative provision for its pupils. In addition, I propose additional measures to strengthen the leadership and governance of schools.

We have some 11,000 school governors who voluntarily take on significant responsibility. I recognise their contribution and take this opportunity to pay tribute to them. From talking to many of them, I know that they regard the role that they play in shaping children's education as a real privilege. That role is pivotal. We know that schools that are effectively led and well managed are, generally, also providing excellent teaching and learning in the classroom. So, I will support governors who set high standards for themselves and their schools, who are not afraid to challenge and who put the interests and education of their pupils first. I will challenge, however, those whose focus is elsewhere. I will examine how we can broaden and strengthen

the existing inspection process to enable the effectiveness of boards of governors to be assessed so that governors can have feedback on how they are doing and good practice can be identified and shared.

I have announced a series of actions today to raise standards, to promote sustainable and financial viability, and to enable us to begin to plan a pattern of provision fit for the future. However, I recognise that our greatest asset is our workforce, and it is clear that the change flowing from more strategic planning of provision will require a more flexible school workforce. I will put together a programme of work to address that after discussions with trade unions and others, and I will return to the Assembly on that subject on another day.

Finally, I want to say a few brief words about how we value education as a society. Education is fundamental to all our futures. Across the Assembly and in every community, we need to have an interest in how well every part of our education system is performing. We need to recognise the strengths of our system and to make sure that we are not complacent about the weaknesses. Those of us with influence have a particular responsibility to champion education in areas and communities where there are still too few champions. That is a theme that I want to return to in the Assembly. I want to have a wider debate about how we can work together — across the Floor of the Assembly, in Committees and with business and community leaders — to send out a clear signal in every community about the importance of education and of ensuring that every school can be not just a good school but a brilliant school.

Today, I have set out a comprehensive and ambitious work programme for the months ahead. It is a work programme that I am committed to seeing through and one that should command the support of the Assembly. The Education Committee will have a particular and important role to play in scrutinising. I shall meet the Committee tomorrow to discuss those proposals in greater detail, and I look forward to that engagement.

I have responded to those who have challenged me to take swifter action to deliver a more sustainable and strategically planned schools estate. I have also responded to those who have encouraged me to provide certainty about the entitlement framework, and I have set out a

clear course of action that is designed to deliver results. The next year will be a year of change in education — change designed to bring greater certainty for schools, parents and, most of all, the young people that the education service is here to serve. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I thank the Minister for his statement to the House today. On behalf of the Committee, I also thank him for briefing me and the Deputy Chair this morning and for agreeing to attend a special Committee meeting tomorrow. That is welcome, and I thank the Minister for ensuring that that will take place as soon as possible.

In his opening comments, the Minister posed, and endeavoured to answer, four questions. First, is our focus right? If you read the statement that has been given to the House, you would find that the answer is “maybe” and “in some areas”. Secondly, are our policies right? The answer, according to the statement, is that some are right, but not all. We see that clearly with regard to special educational needs (SEN) and early years policies, to which reference is limited in the statement. The third question asks: are we developing resources effectively? Clearly, I think that we would all agree that they are not. Fourthly, are we moving fast enough? The answer to that is that, clearly, we are definitely not moving fast enough when we see in the statement the reversal of the decision on the entitlement framework.

Is the Minister satisfied that, in implementing the sustainable schools policy and in bringing forward area planning on the basis that he has outlined in his statement, all sectors — I emphasise all sectors — are equally well prepared and resourced to participate meaningfully in that exercise, which is challenging, given the six-month proposal that he set out? Will he ensure that no sector will be given an advantage over another because of its claim to ownership?

Mr O’Dowd: I will take those questions in reverse order. I assure the Chairperson of the Education Committee that all sectors will be treated equally and that, in fairness to them, all sectors have already been involved in the preparatory work. In my engagement with the boards, CCMS and others, I emphasised the need for a step change in how to deal with unsustainable schools. Therefore, although the detail of the message may be news to them,

certainly the parameters in which I want to work are not.

As I sat down in the Chamber and as we speak, my senior management team in the Department of Education was and is briefing the boards and the CCMS on their future role in the plan. I am confident that we have legislative cover for the work that we have asked for. Indeed, I am confident that we will have the co-operation of all the managing authorities, because the centre of their focus is also the educational well-being of young people.

There was no reversal on the entitlement framework in my speech. No one should send out that message. It is crystal clear that the entitlement framework will commence in 2013. The commencement Order will be signed in December. The reason why there is a slightly longer time frame is because we face a very difficult budgetary process. I would have been criticised, quite rightly, if I had not given it a slightly longer time frame. I think that it is right and proper that schools are given a chance to work towards that.

Is our focus right? I believe that it is right, and I believe that the policies that have been introduced over the past number of years are the right ones. The focus now is on ensuring that those policies are implemented. I did not want to pre-empt the eventual SEN and early years policies, because a number of processes still have to be gone through in those areas. However, I assure the Member and the House that the focus will now be on ensuring that policies for SEN and early years come through as part of a delivery package in the plan.

Are our resources properly funded? No, they are not, hence the reason I am making this statement. We are redirecting our resources correctly. However, whether it is capital or resource spending, the review of the common funding formula is as much in response to demands from various sectors, such as the trade union movement, that believe that the Department is not properly focused on it. It is a review in which I will be open to options and positions. I have no fixed mindset about how to move forward with the common funding formula; I am open to persuasion on that matter.

I assure the Member that, from today, there will be a step change in how we deliver across the sustainable schools policy and Every School a Good School and in how we deliver our capital

build programme. Education will change from this moment on.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we move on to the next question, I remind Members that, although Committee Chairpersons have some latitude when asking their questions, I will look for questions only from other Members.

Mr McKay: Thanks for that, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I very much welcome the Minister's statement. He outlined a decisive, but flexible, way forward for education. He also outlined that he is up to the challenge of addressing the issue of 150 empty schools that the taxpayer is funding. Obviously, the Minister would agree that we have a significant number of high quality schools in rural communities that consistently excel in meeting the needs of their pupils. How can small, high quality schools in acutely rural areas be deemed sustainable under the present policies?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for that question. He is quite right: rural communities present different challenges and opportunities for education. The reason for the six core principles in the sustainable schools policy — quality educational experience; stable enrolment trends; sound financial position; strong leadership and management; accessibility; and strong links with the community — is that we did not want to be involving ourselves in a simple numbers game.

This is not about looking at the enrolment numbers in a school over one or two years and saying that we are going to take action against it. The sustainable schools policy is not about closing schools; it is about challenging schools that are beginning to fall below the six criteria and supporting them. We will reach stages in some schools, and quite rightly so, where the best option for the education of the young people involved is to close the school. However, the sustainable schools policy, which was drawn up in conjunction with a number of rural advocates, is fit for purpose and will protect educational outcomes for young people in rural communities.

Mr McNarry: The Minister asked in his introduction whether our policies were right, whether our focus was right and whether we were moving fast enough. However, he is the third Sinn Féin Education Minister in succession to follow those policies, 13 years of which have, up to

now, given cover to the schools that he now threatens. What will be the consequence of deserting pupils in those schools? How many pupils is he targeting?

Mr O'Dowd: Mr McNarry is using colourful language. I assure him that I am not threatening any school or targeting any pupil, certainly not in a negative way. However, I am targeting schools that are failing their pupils, and I make no apology for that whatsoever. Any school that is failing to provide proper education to young people deserves to be challenged. If, through the challenge process of Every School a Good School, a school cannot turn the corner, it is only right and proper to close it, and I make no apologies for that.

The Member is correct that I am the third successive Sinn Féin Education Minister. In that time, through the implementation of our policies, we have seen a turnaround in the educational attainment of young people, particularly in disadvantaged communities. How have we done that in the face of opposition from some in this Chamber? We have done it by laying out a suite of policies, which, over time, will result in a dramatic change in the educational attainment of young people.

I have said today that we are going to have a step change in the implementation of a number of those policies. There will be a decision for every Member when approached by a school that has been identified as failing: are you going to back the institution, or are you going to back the young people in the school? I will be backing the young people in the school.

Mr McDevitt: In his statement, the Minister described this as a year of change, but, if you read the statement clearly, it will be a year of closures. According to the statement, 287 primary schools and 93 post-primary schools will close. A total of 380 schools face the axe.

If this is a comprehensive and ambitious work programme, where is ESA, where are the cutbacks at central level, where are the efficiencies in administration and when will he come forward with the radical reform that is really needed to reform education around here instead of targeting students, parents and communities with 380 school closures?

Mr O'Dowd: I know that the Member's mind is focused elsewhere, but —

Mr McDevitt: I am focused on children, Minister.

Mr O'Dowd: Well, you have been a member of the Education Committee for five months. I suggest that you go away and read the policies.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask that all comments be made through the Chair.

Mr O'Dowd: I suggest that the Member goes away and reads the policies. This statement has not identified a single school for closure. It is irresponsible of the Member to simply use a figures-based analysis to decide that schools will close, because I can assure him that, although that may be the way that he works, it is not the way that I work.

There is a sustainable schools policy. Go away and read it, go away and rehearse it, and you will find that the schools you are talking about will not all be targeted for closure. However — I say this to Mr McNarry — if Mr McDevitt, as possibly the next leader of the SDLP, wants to stand in defence of substandard education, he can stand in defence of that. I will not be standing beside him.

1.15 pm

Mr Lunn: There have been many references to closure recently. I note in the statement the constant mention of sustainability, viability, 85,000 empty desks and the need for co-operation across sectors and between boards and CCMS. In his statement the Minister said that he will not shirk difficult decisions. Therefore, will he accept that there may be a need for amalgamations of controlled and maintained schools? If that is the best solution for a particular area, can I assume that he will not shirk that decision?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for the question. Let me once again go through how the process will work. I have tasked the education and library boards, along with CCMS, to, after their investigation — not my investigation, their investigation — based on the policies that have been around for several years and the Bain report, which every party in the Chamber endorsed in one way or another and challenged me and my predecessors to implement, come back and tell us which schools are educationally unsound and what plans they have for the children in those schools. If CCMS and the boards come back with a proposal to amalgamate a controlled school and a maintained school, I assure the Member that I will not be turning that proposal away.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have been advised that an additional 18 Members wish to ask a question, so with your help we will try to get through it. I ask Members and, indeed, the Minister to be concise.

Mr Craig: I listened with interest to what the Minister said to the Committee Chairperson with regard to equality of treatment across all sectors when it comes to closures. Will the Minister give the House clear assurances that there will be equality of treatment across all sectors? I ask with a selfish interest, because the board went to consultation on the closure of a controlled school in my sector this weekend. However, I looked through the figures and found eight schools in the maintained sector with smaller enrolment figures, some of them half the number, yet they are not marked for closure.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his comment. One reason why I brought CCMS and the boards together is to ensure that we have a concise policy across the board. I assure the Member that I will insist that there is equality across the board, because we are talking about equality of educational provision for young people, regardless of the sector they attend.

Although I cannot comment on any individual development proposal coming before me, I assure the Member that the last thing I will be looking for in a development proposal is what sector it comes from. I will be looking to ensure that the development proposal is based on my policies and the needs of the young people involved. I also assure the Member that CCMS and the boards are acutely aware of my views on this subject and of how we should move forward.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement. Although any type of change in education can be seen as a threat, the post-primary sector in Strabane has already led the way on this, through the establishment of Holy Cross College and Strabane Academy. That process was completed with great success and is a good template.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, please?

Ms Boyle: Could that template be replicated across the region and the boards?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes, is the simple answer. There are fine examples across the North of schools that have amalgamated. Unfortunately, in that

case, it was only within sectors, but we have examples in the controlled and maintained sectors of an issue being identified and schools moving to correct the issue. Other areas are at different stages of planning down that road. I am also aware that the boards and CCMS have draft plans for other areas, which, I believe, will use the same template.

Miss M McIlveen: The majority of Members represent rural constituencies. Will consideration be given to rural schools, which are small by their nature?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes. As I said to one of my colleagues, the sustainable schools policy is designed to ensure that we look at the needs of the rural community, particularly in the primary sector, given the age of the children involved and the distances that primary-school children may be asked to travel. There are a number of smaller rural schools that you do not necessarily have in an urban setting. That is only correct and proper, and I have no doubt that that sort of delivery will continue. The post-primary sector throws up different scenarios in that you are dealing with older children and young adults and how far they can or should travel. I am satisfied that the sustainable schools policy allows us to look at the rural community and to address the unique challenges and opportunities presented in that setting.

Mrs Dobson: I refer the Minister to his comments near the end of his statement:

"I want to have a wider debate about how we can work together — across the Floor of the Assembly".

Will the Minister assure the House that he will be a cross-party Minister and ensure that all shades of opinion are heard before decisions are taken and presented to the Executive?

Mr O'Dowd: Any plans that come forward from the joint work of the boards and the CCMS will have to go out to public consultation. Any proposal to change the nature of a school, including a closure, has to go through the development proposal process, which also involves consultation.

I would like an open and frank debate about the future of education and exactly why we, as a society, quite rightly provide 12 years of free education and what we want to achieve through that education. I sense that, in some homes, communities and areas, we have lost the rationale

for it, which is what I am emphasising in the debate. We need to regain and grasp the gift that is 12 years of free education. As a society, we need to move forward with that in mind. We need to continue to analyse why we provide that education. One of the reasons why we do it is to add value to the individual child and person; that is lost in the debate sometimes.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's statement, and I wish him well in delivering on it. The Minister's challenge to a lot of Members was to be champions for education. I want to be a champion for education in the north-west, particularly in my constituency. There has been huge investment, and the Minister met Foyle and Londonderry College and Ebrington Primary School over the summer recess. What hope or comfort can he give to those two schools, which meet all the criteria that the Minister has laid out in relation to numbers, viability and financial sustainability?

Mr O'Dowd: I will not comment on any individual project; that would be wrong. We have a number of pieces of work to complete, and each school will be dealt with on its own merits. On the broader principle, I will say that, if those schools that were on the investment delivery plan (IDP) list and have been waiting a considerable time for newbuilds to begin remain viable and come through the new process that I will set out in relation to area planning, sustainability and educational entitlement going into the future, they will be priorities. However, I will not debate individual projects on the Floor of the Assembly before the work that I have commissioned is complete.

Mrs Hale: Will flexibility stretch to transferring money from capital budgets into minor works so that a school such as Dromore Central Primary School in my constituency, which has been waiting a long time for a newbuild, will at least get the toilet blocks that it so desperately needs?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member touches on an interesting point. Part of my programme of work going forward is that we need to use our minor works scheme in a more strategic way and in conjunction with the series of works that I have set out. Once the boards and the CCMS come back with their plans on viable schools, we may have to build a new wing onto a school or to make improvements to an existing school to allow pupils to transfer to it. I am not going to

comment on the individual application, but it may be the case that we have to carry out major improvements to schools that were once on the capital build list or are still on that list. That will mean a more strategic use of the minor works programme.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Mar bhall den Choiste Oldeachais, cuirim fáilte roimh an ráiteas seo. Given that schools adjacent to the border are primarily smaller and more rural than those in urban areas, has the Minister considered sharing resources with nearby schools in the Twenty-six Counties and other such measures, which would prevent the duplication of services along the border region, therefore enabling children to go to schools closer to their homes and saving significant money for both educational systems?

Mr O'Dowd: One thing that we will have to look at is how we provide education for the mutual benefit of communities straddling both sides of the border. The subject was touched on at the recent North/South Ministerial Council meeting in education sectoral format, and I will be making a full statement to the Assembly in the coming weeks. Minister Quinn and I had a discussion around the subject, and one idea we floated was that, if children are travelling back and forth across the border, it is quite simple that each Administration can bill the other for the service being delivered, regardless of what side of the border it is on. However, when you look at rural communities, particularly those straddling the border, you will see that one option should be how we use facilities, regardless of which side of the border they are on, to the mutual benefit of the communities on either side of the border.

Mr Campbell: In talking about capital investment, the Minister outlined the issue regarding the clear criteria for access. He said that he would put in place a new explicit process for capital planning, but he also said that he will not answer specific questions about newbuild. Will he outline to the House, and to those schools that are waiting a long, long time — schools that are in need of newbuild and have passed all the criteria — the timing of when he expects the issues outlined in his statement to finish, so that those schools will know the outcome of the process?

Mr O'Dowd: I have asked for area plans and so on to be back with me within this school year.

If the boards and the CCMS can work quicker on individual areas, I am more than happy to receive those plans, as long as they are based on the principles that I have set out.

The main terms of reference for the new building criteria will be based on area planning and sustainable schools and the assurance that, wherever we build a school and for whatever sector, that school can provide the entire curriculum either on its own or in conjunction with schools around it. I also want to be assured that, when proposals are coming forward to me, they not only serve the needs of the sector but that the question has been asked of the sector surrounding the school as to how facilities can be shared or built that will meet its needs as well.

I understand the disappointment and continuing frustration of schools on the IDP list and, indeed, other lists. However, I am sure the Member will agree that, given the changing economic climate I am working in — £400 million has been wiped off the capital build budget — whatever schools I build in the future, we have to make sure that the Education Minister coming behind me or the one after that is not closing them and that they stay open for at least a couple of generations.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his statement. I noticed this morning that the First Minister seems to have stolen a march on the statement to some extent. I ask the Minister how many times the First Minister has submitted specific proposals to him with regards to educational reform? How will this plan deliver more schools with a shared and integrated ethos, which many people recognise are needed to solve the problem we have of empty school places?

Mr O'Dowd: The First Minister has made his views on education known before. He is perfectly entitled to do so, as is any Member of the House. That is the nature of politics, and I have no difficulty with that. I have discussed education with the First Minister in my current role as Education Minister and my temporary role as Acting deputy First Minister. I hope to have further discussions with him and other ministerial colleagues.

1.30 pm

The Member asked about integrated schools. The integrated sector will be closely involved in discussions with the boards and CCMS, as will Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and other sectors. If the boards and CCMS bring me new

and imaginative proposals or plans, whether for integrated schools, shared schools or campuses or cross-sectoral amalgamations, I assure you that I will look on them favourably.

Mrs Overend: My East Londonderry colleague got in ahead of me by asking about the time frame. The Minister stated that schools should meet the needs of students and local communities, but he was cautious on the subject of newbuilds. My original question was about the time frame involved in assessing schools, such as Rainey Endowed in Magherafelt, which deliver a high standard of education and enjoy the confidence of the community, yet are housed in buildings that are certainly not from the 21st century and have already been waiting for a newbuild for years. Does the Minister foresee all the boards working together within that time frame or some being ahead of others?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member will understand that, as I said to other Members during Question Time, I will not go into specific applications for new buildings or schools. However, I assure her and all Members that any school that currently provides or has the capacity to provide the full entitlement framework and is sustainable, financially viable, has links with its community and shows strong leadership in the classroom and throughout the school will, in my opinion, meet the new criteria and move forward.

The next and most difficult question is, of course, where we find the money to build those new schools. We have to set priorities for the future. I intend this work to be completed as quickly as possible. The first stage of identifying viable schools will be completed within six months. As I said, if boards working with CCMS come forward with plans earlier, I will accept them. The end of June 2012 is the deadline for area plans. Again, if the boards and CCMS come forward with plans earlier, I will accept those.

Mr Moutray: Will the Minister explain how his proposed changes to the entitlement framework will secure and enhance schools in the Dickson plan system?

Mr O'Dowd: They will enhance and secure schools in any system, because the entitlement framework is about offering a broader range of subjects to individual pupils to create a broader workforce for the future. The entitlement framework should not pose a threat to any sector; it should be seen as a challenge. That is why I extended the time frame slightly. Although

all policies will have their critics, my view is that the entitlement framework is a policy that has more people advocating it than speaking against it. Whether it is the Dickson plan in Craigavon or unique plans in other areas, I am satisfied that the basis of the entitlement framework is such that it will enhance education services across the North.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement. I refer you to page 3 of your statement, Minister. Do you now regret putting through the letterbox of every house in Upper Bann a newsletter with a picture of you beside a poster saying, "Stop the Cuts", given that today's statement is nothing more than a smokescreen and a cover-up for the worst education budget ever — ever — and a failure —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Question, please.

Mrs D Kelly: It speaks more to the failure of Sinn Féin and the DUP to agree an Education and Skills Authority —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs D Kelly: — and demanding from schools actions on which you have failed to give the lead —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Will the Member take her seat, please?

Mr O'Dowd: I suspect that some households in Upper Bann regretted seeing my picture come through their letterbox. Other than that, however, I have no regrets. Should the Member care to examine the policies that I advocate today, she will realise that the majority were brought forward in much friendlier economic circumstances than those that we are dealing with currently. The policies announced today are a planned way forward for education. The Budget settlement may have expedited our approach and focused us more on the need to implement the policies, but I assure Mrs Kelly that they are not a panicked response to the education budget, and they are certainly not a panicked response to the cuts. Mrs Kelly may choose to forget that those cuts were imposed on this Administration by the British Government.

Mrs Kelly and her colleagues may be focusing on who will be leader and who will be deputy leader of their party; that may be the current focus at their Members' meetings on a Monday morning. However, I assure her that, since I came into the post, my focus has been and is on how we plan the way forward — not on panic.

Mr S Anderson: I thank the Minister. Perhaps I will tone things down a little bit on behalf of Upper Bann. The Minister said that he does not want to discuss specific issues, but I am sure he will forgive me for taking this opportunity to make an effort. In light of his statement —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Could we have a question, please?

Mr S Anderson: Does the Minister have any assessment of the implications for new capital builds such as those at Portadown and Lurgan colleges in my constituency, Upper Bann?

Mr O'Dowd: No, and I think it would be wrong for me to do so. There is no point in tasking the boards and CCMS to do work, only for me to stand here and say five minutes later what will or will not commence in the future.

I understand the frustration and, indeed, anger surrounding some of the projects involved, but I, as a Minister, and we, as an Assembly, must ensure that the moneys we use are used appropriately. It is worth noting that one of my first tasks as Minister of Education was to close a primary school in north Antrim. That school had been built approximately six years previously. Approximately £2 million of public funds had been spent on it, and it is now closed. I do not want Ministers coming into my post after I have left it and having to close recently built schools that were planned to last for 40 or 50 years. Let us ensure that our limited budget is spent properly.

Mr I McCrea: My colleague from Mid Ulster has spoken of Rainey Endowed School, so I will not go into too much detail on that. However, the fact is that the PPP project for that school was originally in, along with Ballymoney High School. The criteria were changed, so —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Could we have a question, please?

Mr I McCrea: Does the Minister intend to use the current criterion — either fully, partially or not compliant — in relation to capital build works?

Mr O'Dowd: The review carried out by my predecessor was done so in more favourable financial circumstances and did not involve area planning. The new criteria that will be in place will involve area planning. I want to ensure that, instead of looking at the needs of school A, we look at the needs of schools B, C and D around school A. It might include schools from different

sectors as well. So, that will be the new criteria in moving forward. We should not build schools that do not comply with the broadening curriculum or are not sustainable or financially viable. That would be an unsound decision, both educationally and financially. The step change is that the needs of individual schools will not be paramount; the defining criteria will be the needs of the sector and sectors around the school.

Mr Allister: If there is so much that needs to be fixed in education, who was responsible for education for all these years and got us into this mess? The Minister assures that he will be even-handed when it comes to closures: is that the same even-handedness that we have seen over the past three years, with the closing of 14 controlled schools and the opening of 14 Irish-medium schools?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member asks who was responsible for the state of our education system in the past. Given that a recent workforce survey showed that 25% of workers between the ages of 16 and 64 did not have the necessary numeracy or literacy skills, how far back do you want me to go?

Mr Allister: Just deal with Sinn Féin.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member is one of those who defend all that is good in our education system and ignore all that is bad. I, as Education Minister, will praise all that is good in our education system, but I will certainly challenge all that is bad in it. I am not prepared to turn a blind eye to failing schools or to schools that send pupils out into the world with no added value or exam qualifications. People such as Jim Allister and others might simply ignore that and say that that is where those children go, so let us forget about that because we have a great school over there. The system that I am setting out today will meet the requirements of all our schoolchildren, regardless of their socio-economic or religious background. I can assure the Member of that.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also welcome the Minister's statement. Has he looked at the possibility of harmonising school holidays?

Mr O'Dowd: Not at this stage. It is certainly something that many parents would appreciate. However, it is still the case that boards of governors have autonomy in their own school

to set various holidays, although I understand that the education boards and CCMS have been working closely with schools, particularly in geographical areas, to try to match up the school holidays. However, there are no immediate plans to carry out any further work on that matter at this stage.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as an ráiteas a d'fhógair sé inniu agus ceist a thógáil faoin phlean infheistíochta caipitil. I thank the Minister for his statement. I notice that he intends to review projects on the investment delivery plan. Does he not remember that that exercise was undertaken just over a year ago by his predecessor? Is it not highly frustrating for schools, such as St Clare's Primary School in Newry, that have already been waiting for years for projects to be realised? Surely, at this stage, the Minister —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has posed his question.

Mr D Bradley: Surely, at this stage, the Minister and his Department should know which projects are needed and where they are needed.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member will also be aware that, since the previous review was carried out, £400 million has been cut from our capital programme by the British Government. I can proceed with my head in the sand and ignore that fact, or I can plan and move forward with that reality in the back of my mind. However, the Member is correct in one sense: the assessment is not starting off with a blank piece of paper. The boards and CCMS will go into their discussions well informed and well briefed, with a considerable amount of background material from which to work. It is not starting from a blank sheet of paper.

I think that the Member will agree that, whether in his constituency or other constituencies, we want to ensure that we build the right school in the right place for the right number of pupils. That is how we will move forward with the building programme. We will no longer be concentrating on the needs of school A; the schools around it will also be brought into the equation.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like others, I welcome the Minister's statement and its focus on young people as being paramount. I remind Members that some

of our schools are still failing children. We have a lot of kids leaving school without basic essential skills. We should not run away from that fact either. As I said, I welcome the focus. Will the Minister give us a bit more detail on the SEN and early years strategies, as well as a possible time frame for when the strategies will kick in?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for her question. The consultations on SEN and early years have understandably seen great interest from the public, politicians and the sectors, with a great deal of information coming back into my Department. Examination of the consultation process is nearly complete. I will be moving on to the next phases for how we implement or determine which policies to move forward. I can assure the Member that, now that that work is being implemented and moving forward, my focus will be on bringing SEN and early years to the table and to conclusion very quickly. It is the other leg of the stool in moving education forward, and, as such, it is a vital component of our education services. I can assure the Member that my focus will be on those two policies in the weeks and months ahead.

1.45 pm

Mr B McCrea: The Minister has, rightly, declined to get involved in discussions about individual school projects. However, he said that "sometimes unpopular but necessary decisions" will be required and that:

"politics is about making a positive difference and not about seeking short-term popularity".

Can he explain how democratically elected representatives will be able to take part in that decision-making process?

Mr O'Dowd: As Minister, I am accountable to the Assembly and to the Committee for Education. As I said in my statement, I will appear before the Committee tomorrow when it will further scrutinise the statement and the programmes of work outlined in it. The area plans will go out to public consultation, as will any development proposal for the future of a school, whether that is amalgamation or closure, and the newbuild programme will be open to scrutiny. It depends on the kind of democratic accountability you are referring to. This institution is democratically accountable; I am elected from it to be the Minister of Education. I am tasked by the electorate and the legislation that governs the

Assembly to make decisions, and, therefore, I will make those decisions. At times, it may be quite convenient to hide behind a collective view on something, but Ministers sometimes have to make decisions, and I will make them.

Youth Justice Review

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the review of the youth justice system in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members who wish to leave the Chamber should do so quietly.

Mr Ford: As the House will recall, in line with the Hillsborough Castle Agreement, last November I commissioned an independent team of experts to review the youth justice system in Northern Ireland. I have now received the report, which I am publishing today. I will begin by expressing my gratitude to the review team — John Graham, Stella Perrott and Kathleen Marshall — for its work. I recall that, when I commissioned the team to undertake the review, I set an initial timescale that, in hindsight, was too challenging. I was happy to listen to the words of the Committee for Justice and to take the team's advice then and throughout the exercise that more time was required to do justice to the final product.

Now that I have the report, I can appreciate the scope and breadth of the review and the thoroughness and care with which the team approached its task. It is evident to me that, in delivering on their terms of reference, the team members not only consulted widely but brought to bear their own expertise and experience and lessons from research. I am particularly pleased that, in a very balanced way, they have highlighted what is good about youth justice in Northern Ireland and where there is scope for improvement. They have acknowledged the extent to which we have embraced and developed restorative approaches, which have translated into inclusive, practical and effective arrangements within which victims can participate and young offenders can be held accountable for their actions. It is reassuring to know how highly that process is regarded. They have praised the way in which policing has been transformed and the extent to which a fundamental understanding around rights, mutual respect and equality is underpinning all that we do. They report on outstanding examples of professionalism and commitment and have singled out for particular praise the way in which the Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre is operated. However, the review also clearly identifies aspects that are less good.

The team says that our overall strategic arrangements are weak and that leadership and working together at the highest level are matters that need serious attention. It argues, with good cause, for a greater focus on a more joined-up approach to early intervention and on not letting vulnerable young people slip through important safety nets. It also calls for changes in the way the criminal justice system processes cases because of, for example, the impact of delay on victims and offenders and on confidence in the system itself. The team wants us to speed up the work that is already in hand on removing under-18-year-olds from Hydebank Wood young offenders centre, as was also recommended by the prison review and the Criminal Justice Inspection (CJI).

The team's analysis and thoughtful conclusions present us with an impressive piece of work that will help to shape our responses to youth crime and associated issues. Taken together with other initiatives, such as the recent publication of the access to justice report, the development of a new community safety strategy and the prison review, it underlines my commitment to an ambitious programme of reform of the criminal justice system.

I have considered how best to take forward the report and have concluded that I should subject it, in its entirety, to a full public consultation. I had considered consulting on only those aspects that evidently require it, but I decided that a selective or piecemeal approach would undermine the integrated and holistic nature of the report and generate unproductive debate on what should or should not be included.

I appreciate that a public consultation exercise will take time, but it will allow for the fullest consideration of the detailed analysis and recommendations in the report and will rightly give the widest possible audience an opportunity to comment on a fundamentally important matter. It is right to reach sound conclusions and a balanced consensus on the basis of a well-informed debate. It will also give me and my Executive colleagues the opportunity to reflect on the implications for our working arrangements. I have already shared the report with them. The Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister for Social Development have responded by welcoming, in particular, the emphasis in the report on early intervention and prevention. I look forward to receiving comments from other Ministers soon.

I do not, therefore, propose to comment in detail on all the recommendations in the report, other than to say that some are likely to secure universal agreement while others are more challenging. For example, I cannot see anyone objecting to joined-up working at all levels with a greater emphasis on early intervention and prevention. Nor can I see many objections to promoting the issue of parental responsibility or to finding ways of operating more efficiently in the interests of offenders, victims and justice. How we achieve those ends will be the real challenge. However, any proposal to increase the age of criminal responsibility is likely to evoke strongly held and entirely legitimate but polarised views on the subject. Indeed, the notion that the rights of offenders of whatever age need to be considered will be anathema to some, given the harm that they have caused. It is because those matters go to the very heart of our values and beliefs about children and how they should be nurtured that we need to have the widest consultation and the fullest possible debate.

I also want to say something about some of the overarching themes that emerge from the report. I am pleased that the review team has highlighted the absolute requirement for a strategic cross-governmental approach to youth crime and has noted that the issues that are associated with children and offending extend well beyond the boundaries of the Department of Justice. Tackling youth crime and the harm that it causes is not a matter for my Department alone. We are already working in partnership with others through initiatives such as collaborative working in disadvantaged areas, but we can do more.

The team has reinforced the importance of early intervention and the value of ensuring that young people, particularly those at risk, continue to have full access to universal services, including education and health. I think that all of us can intuitively and on the basis of sound evidence identify with those views. The team has also reminded us that the vast majority of young people make a positive contribution to society and do not engage in crime and that those who do should not be regarded as lost causes, with the lifetime's loss of potential and cost to society that that entails. Rather, it is by demonstrating to those young people that they can have a positive future that we will have the greatest chance of helping them to turn their life around.

The review team has emphasised the need to have concern for victims and has praised, with good cause, the development here of restorative approaches that engage the victim and enable a young offender to take responsibility and make amends for their behaviour. Supporting victims during their engagement with the criminal justice system is also a priority for me. We plan to consult on a new strategy for victims and witnesses of crime early next year to ensure the ongoing strategic delivery of improved services to victims and witnesses, and I am pleased that the Committee for Justice has decided to undertake its own work in that area. We will work closely with it as it does so.

The review points to the need for greater efficiency in the criminal justice system to ensure that justice is delivered effectively for victims and young offenders alike. That is already the focus of the access to justice review and the speeding up justice programme, which seeks to build on the work that is already in hand to tackle delay. Along with greater efficiency, it emphasises the importance of having systems that are transparent, responsive, proportionate and fair.

Finally, the team reminds us why it is important to live up to our international obligations in relation to children. We do it not out of slavish ideology but because it builds in them a respect for the rights of others and protects them as they develop from the many negative influences to which they may be subjected.

I look forward to having a detailed debate on these and related issues over the coming months. In the meantime, I am pleased to begin that process with the publication of the report today.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I thank the Minister for the report and his statement. I agree that young people need to get an opportunity in life, and it is important that systems are put in place to allow that to happen. Many of them come from a broken home and need to have that support at an early stage. Therefore, I welcome the report's inclusion of early intervention, which should be developed on a cross-departmental basis. However, I am concerned that the element relating to increasing the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 12 will distract from all the other issues that are highlighted in the report. We should not pursue the United Nations' agenda on the rights of the child, because it does not have the right way to deal with it.

The "hug a hoody" approach will not solve the problem, and the Minister should remove that from the consultation. If the Minister is going to consult on the age of criminal responsibility, will he look at proposals that will lower the age of criminal responsibility from 10? I agree with the report where it says that prosecution should be reserved for cases where it is necessary because of their nature. Indeed, more young people are now diverted rather than prosecuted, but to lift the age from 10 to 12 would remove individuals such as those who killed Jamie Bulger, who were only 10 years of age. That would be a retrograde step and will distract from all of this work. I ask the Minister to reflect on that.

Mr Ford: I thank the Committee Chair for his positive remarks about early intervention. However, it is deeply unfortunate that the substantive point that he raised is about one of the 31 recommendations. It is also deeply disappointing that that particular issue was leaked to the BBC, when it was released in confidence to the members of the Committee on Friday afternoon.

I fear that the very fact that that was the first question to be asked distracts attention, as the Chair highlighted, from the key issues in the report about reforming the justice system in a meaningful way. The practical reality is that, if the age of criminal responsibility were to be increased from 10 to 12, it would remove something like 2.5% of the young people who are involved in the criminal justice system. It would take out 27 court cases in the past year, so we are talking about tiny numbers of 10- and 11-year-olds. When young people of that age come into contact with the criminal justice system, they are almost inevitably dealt with more by care processes than by criminal justice processes. To suggest that it is somehow a key issue in the report distracts from the real issues that we need to address as a society. Having said that I am putting the whole report out for consultation, I am putting the whole report out for consultation. I am entirely aware, if I was not already, that one particular contentious item should not distract from the work that needs to be done.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also welcome the Minister's statement on the report. Early intervention and prevention are key issues. One of the report's recommendations is that all under-18s should be removed from detention in Hydebanks Wood.

Does the Minister have a time frame for putting that in place?

Mr Ford: I thank Ms McCann for her positive remarks about early intervention. Significant work is being done to reduce the number of 17-year-olds in Hydebank Wood. At this stage, we are not at the point where we can say that there are none in Hydebank Wood, but there is a much higher proportion in Woodlands than was the case even a year ago. The report makes recommendations about reducing the number of young people remanded to the juvenile justice centre to free up some space, which would make it possible for some of the Woodlands staff to take on a greater number of 17-year-olds. At this stage, I cannot give Ms McCann a specific timescale, but I can say that, in that sense, the report is entirely in line with what is being said by the prison review team and a number of NGOs and with the direction in which the Department is seeking to move.

2.00 pm

Mr B McCrea: Does the Minister accept that, following the riots in London, there is a danger that some might think that this report is a little bit too skewed towards the defendant rather than the victim? Does he accept that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is a legally binding commitment for the United Kingdom? Therefore, will he explain why Woodlands should not be used as a remand centre but for the purpose for which it was originally intended?

Mr Ford: I am not quite sure of the relevance of the London riots to our work on long-term reforms to the justice system in general and, in the context of today, particularly the effects of the justice system on young people. Woodlands is designed to provide custody for those who require it before or after trial. The key point centres around an issue that has been discussed in this Assembly on numerous occasions: speeding up the justice system. There is no doubt that it is much more difficult for the staff of Woodlands to work with young people when they are in custody for short periods before trial. They sometimes go in, are released by the courts, and have to go back into the centre again. All that is disruptive to the good long-term work that is being done with those who are there because of sentencing. Speeding up the justice system is really needed for young people as opposed to adults.

Mr Eastwood: I echo Ms McCann's words about the Hydebank young offenders centre and ask you for a definite answer and definite timetable for when under-18s will be removed from that centre. It is important, Minister, that you show leadership on this issue today and give us a definite time frame.

Mr Ford: I assure the Member that, if I could give a definite time frame, I would be very happy to. The reality is that, on the back of a report that is out for consultation, it is a bit difficult. However, I will repeat what I said to Ms McCann: that is the Department's intention and direction of travel. However, there are issues with the way in which the court system affects the numbers of young people in Woodlands. There are issues with the resources that are needed to enable Woodlands to deal with, as the report highlights, the two or three extremely difficult-to-manage young people who would potentially be there at any one time if Hydebank were not available. I cannot give a definite time frame on those issues, but the direction of travel over the 18 months that I have had responsibility for the issue shows the direction in which we are seeking to move.

Mr Dickson: Minister, thank you for your statement. The report gives particular praise to the way in which Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre is operated. Given that praise, and appreciating that the Minister will not give us a timeline — perhaps like the Minister who spoke to the Chamber previously — will you give serious consideration to that recommendation?

Mr Ford: Given the contents of the prison review team report, the representations made by a number of NGOs and the contents of this report, it is absolutely clear that we need to look to manage the needs of young people as efficiently as possible. It is clear that Woodlands is the centre that is providing appropriate services for the great majority of under-18s who need to be in custody, but it is also clear that we need to do further work on developing the skills and expertise there to deal with, perhaps, some building issues that might be required to manage a small number of particularly difficult offenders. I am also well aware, even from my personal experience, of the problems that exist at Hydebank Wood and why it is so beneficial that we seek a direction of travel that will make better and more efficient use of Woodlands. So, the commitment and necessity are there,

but that does not mean that it can be done tomorrow.

Mr Weir: The Minister has rightly highlighted that there will be no consensus on some aspects of this, such as the age of criminal responsibility, and we will vigorously oppose the potential changes to that. However, I want to ask the Minister about one area on which there should be greater consensus. The report highlights the concern that I am sure all of us have with delays in the system and quotes, for instance, the aim to reduce the 260-day period to a 120-day period. Has the Department any initial thoughts on how it can reduce the delays in the system?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Weir for that question, which highlights the serious issue of ensuring that young offenders go through the criminal justice system within a period in which, frankly, they can remember what the offence was. I have highlighted in the Chamber before that we have seen extremely good work done in the past year or so by the police and the Public Prosecution Service in improving their liaison and speeding up the timescale in which cases get to court.

The report raises the issue of whether there should be formal statutory time limits. In truth, we are not at a stage where we could have that because there would be sufficient difficulty in meeting such time limits at present. However, the report also points out — as did the team during private conversation — that it might be necessary to insert specific statutory time limits some distance ahead to provide the impetus to see that those necessary reforms happen. That is the kind of issue about which it will be interesting to see the consultation responses.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a chara. I thank the Minister for his statement. He said that the public consultation will take time: how long does the Minister think it should take?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Lynch for what is possibly the most straightforward question that I have had today. We have set a three-month consultation period to 31 December, so it is slightly longer than the standard 12 weeks. I am sure that those who wish to take the New Year's Day bank holiday to finalise their reports will see that they are still well received on 2 or 3 January.

Mr Wells: Does the Minister accept that one proposal in the report will cause great controversy? Many in the community and, indeed, Members

on this side of the House will have enormous difficulties with the proposal in the report to increase the age of criminal responsibility. Will he confirm that if, after consultation, he believes that to be the way forward, such a change will require legislation and that legislation will require cross-community support?

Mr Ford: It is my understanding that such proposals would require legislation. It is not my understanding that any legislation in this place requires cross-community support unless the appropriate mechanisms are engaged. However, we should not concentrate on that issue today. We should be looking at the wider issues in the report and the necessity of getting the appropriate reforms so that young offenders and their victims get better treatment from society.

Mr Copeland: I, too, thank the Minister for his statement and for commissioning the report from which it flowed.

Justice is traditionally portrayed as blindfolded. She carries the sword of retribution and a set of scales to represent balance. I accept and share the concerns about increasing the age of criminal responsibility. In the interest of balance, if we remove criminal responsibility for another two years, we must be mindful that there are people who will take advantage of that. We cannot do that without examining the current deterrents and, perhaps, bringing forward new legislation to create new offences of encouraging, promoting or causing someone below the age of criminal responsibility to commit a criminal act, because that will happen.

Mr Ford: I have no intention of talking any more about that specific recommendation. No doubt, the Member and others will wish to comment during the consultation.

Mr McDevitt: I am sure that the Minister agrees that, over the next 12 weeks or so, an informed debate is needed and not one based on hysteria. With that in mind, does the Minister think that it is a cause for serious misgiving that the report makes no apparent reference to the work that was commissioned by Mr Basil McCrea, in his time as Chair of the human rights and professional standards committee of the Policing Board, into children and young people's interface with policing and criminal justice in Northern Ireland? Will the Minister give a commitment to the House that that work will be addressed during the consultation period and

in his Department during his reflection on the outcome of the consultation?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr McDevitt for that point. I am not sure that his presumption is right just because the specific report of the board is not mentioned. I understand that Alyson Kilpatrick, the board's human rights adviser, who had a hand in helping to write that report — Mr McCrea may or may not nod in agreement — was closely engaged with the work of the review team. There is absolutely no doubt that she, along with officials and members of the board, will have a comment now. It is certainly something that I expect the Department to take strong note of, because the Policing Board has a significant function in that area.

Mr S Anderson: I thank the Minister for his statement. Although the report praises the improvements in policing in recent years, it is also unduly critical of the police. Does the Minister agree that we need to see policing that is not only fair but robust against youth crime?

Mr Ford: We need to see policing that is robust and fair in all respects. However, we also need to ensure that we do not unnecessarily criminalise young people if there are alternative and more informal ways of diverting them from the path of crime.

Lord Morrow: In his statement, the Minister said of the review team that:

"They have praised the way in which policing has been transformed and the extent to which a fundamental understanding around rights, mutual respect and equality is underpinning all we do."

Is it true that that has more to do with a box-ticking exercise and very little to do with curbing crime? Will he explain to the House how he will instil the confidence of the law-abiding community when he comes forward with proposals that have very little to do with looking after the rights of victims but more to do with the criminal?

Mr Ford: I remind Lord Morrow that it is an independent report that I commissioned: it is not a statement of departmental objectives by the Minister. However, the manner in which the review team addressed its responsibilities has taken account of a wide range of issues, including the best method by which we protect society by encouraging young people not to get involved in crime at all or to desist from crime if they are engaged in it. We need to look at the matter in a holistic way and not in a knee-jerk

way where we look at small areas of the report. I trust that when Members have seen the report in full detail they will recognise its value as a whole.

Mr Spratt: In his statement, the Minister said that tackling youth crime and its causes is not a matter for his Department alone and that his Department is already working in partnership with others through initiatives such as collaborative working in disadvantaged areas. Will he give the House more detail on the work in the disadvantaged areas referred to in the report?

Mr Ford: I am happy to go into whatever detail the House wants at an appropriate stage. As Mr Spratt correctly stated, the report merely highlights the fact that it is not a matter for the Department of Justice (DOJ) alone. For example, the collaborative working in disadvantaged areas project has involved the Department of Justice, the police, the Department for Social Development as regards neighbourhood renewal, Belfast City Council at local authority level and some other agencies looking at how resources are spent, how they best address the problems of disadvantaged areas, and how co-ordination ensures that there is not a multiplicity of resources in one area while other aspects of life in that community are neglected. It is simply getting good value for money by ensuring that each Department knows what other Departments are doing and ensuring that they work together to achieve those objectives. From what I have seen over the past year, very positive results have come through to ensure that we get best value for money and the joined-up approach that we talk a lot about in the Chamber but rarely see on the ground.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's statement on youth justice. Is it hoped that more resources will go into youth counselling and the probationary service to ensure that fewer young people are convicted of crime? The emphasis on diversion is welcome.

2.15 pm

Mr Ford: I am tempted not to say that I thank the Member for the question, because the issue of resources is clearly going to be a difficult one for us. I have just talked, with regard to collaborative working, about making best use of the resources that we have. However, there is no doubt that it will not be possible to do all that we will hope to do, given the financial pressures that we are under. Having said that, I am happy

that this year's DOJ budget has protected front line services across the Department and its agencies, regardless of who delivers them. We have been encouraging that level of collaboration. Such bodies as the Criminal Justice Board have ensured a better joining up between the different agencies, and such measures as speeding up justice have helped to provide more resources to go into the front line diversionary activities. However, it is an ongoing challenge of which we have to be very conscious.

Mr Allister: The Minister may well be right that the issue of increasing the age of criminal responsibility might overshadow other worthwhile parts of this report, but is he not the author of his own misfortune by the folly of including that in the terms of reference? He must have known that there would be huge opposition to it, in light of something that happened in the living memory of us all — the horrendous murder of James Bulger by Thompson and Venables, two 10-year-old boys who showed criminal craft way beyond their years. Is it something the Minister should have appreciated would never command the support necessary? Therefore, will he now withdraw that absurd and wrong proposition?

Mr Ford: I am not sure how I can be the author of my own misfortune when the issue of the review of the youth justice system was a specific agreement at Hillsborough Castle in February last year. Although I had some input into the work of that agreement, I was not party to its final stages. Similarly, the age of criminal responsibility was not an issue that was a specific matter of terms of reference; it was to be a wide-ranging review of the youth justice system. It is, perhaps, therefore inevitable that the age of criminal responsibility was included in that review. However, when Members look at the report, I trust that they will see how limited an amount of it dwells on that issue.

Mr Agnew: I welcome the Minister's statement. Given the amount of evidence that shows that locking up our children is not an effective form of preventing crime or of providing good outcomes with regard to reoffending, I welcome the proposal to review the age of criminal responsibility. I am disturbed by the Committee Chairman's hang-a-hoody approach.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member come to his question, please?

Mr Agnew: The Minister referred to the efficient use of resources. Given that most of the actions that can be taken to prevent offending are outside the Minister's remit, what work is he undertaking with the Health Department and the Department of Education to address early intervention and early education strategies? Has the Minister considered pooled budgets with those Departments?

Mr Ford: I am not sure which of the eight questions to answer. I cannot find a quick, slick phrase, but my policy is neither hug a hoody nor hang a hoody; my policy is reform a hoody. If somebody could give me a short word beginning with "h" that means reform, I will happily adopt it.

Mr Agnew rightly raises resources and collaborative working between different Departments. The report has been circulated to other Ministers so that they can look at how it works. There are other fora, such as the Executive's subcommittee on children and young people, which enable some of that collaborative working to be done. Mr Agnew is right: if we are going to deter young people from the path of crime, it is not going to be done by the Department of Justice and its agencies when they get to the point of crime. We need much closer involvement and engagement with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education, in particular.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement, and I welcome the report. I look forward to the appearance of the review team before the Committee.

The Minister said that there are 31 recommendations and that there is a 12-week consultation. Will the Department be working on any of the recommendations as the consultation progresses so that we will be in a better position to meet the many challenges that the Minister has outlined when we reach the end of the consultation process?

Mr Ford: I take the point that the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee has made. There are issues in the report on which the Department can engage. Indeed, the Department is already engaged on some of those issues, and I highlighted the issue of seeking to remove young people from Hydebank Wood. The Department will certainly not be sitting back

until early January and doing nothing. We will not take decisions that are clearly the subject of the main areas of consultation. However, we will continue to work on a number of reforms on things like speeding up justice and the best ways in which young people can be looked after at Woodlands. That work will ensure that the general thrust of the report can be carried through as fast as possible.

Mr Kinahan: I also thank the Minister for his statement. The report notes that, although there are many youth strategies, there is no early intervention strategy, nor is there a children's strategy. The authors of the report also noted that they were "impressed" by David Trimble's announcement of a children's strategy in 2001. When does the Minister expect to see such a strategy in place? Is he talking to the other Departments and Ministers to get a strategy in place as soon as possible?

Mr Ford: I tried to make it clear in my statement that the report has been circulated to other Departments, and I also highlighted that the youth justice system cannot be dealt with by the Department of Justice alone. We have done our best in the DOJ to promote co-operative and collaborative working, as I highlighted when I referred to some of the work that we are doing in disadvantaged areas. We cannot write the children's strategy for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, but we can ensure that we have the best joined-up working on the issues of youth offending and the reform of youth offenders.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That brings to an end questions to the Minister of Justice on his statement.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During his response to my question, the Minister of Justice seemed to indicate that — I am sure that he did not mean to — any legislation that he may bring to the House to raise the age of legal responsibility would not require cross-community support. Point me in the right direction if I am wrong, Mr Deputy Speaker, but it is my understanding that all legislation that comes before the House can be subject to a petition of concern, which automatically triggers the requirement for cross-community support. Therefore, the Minister has, technically, slightly misled the House in stating that that is not the case.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member is correct that cross-community votes can be triggered in a certain way. However, I am not sure that the Minister has misled the House in any way, and if anyone has any doubt about that, they can check with the Speaker. As Members will know, there is a mechanism through which a petition of concern can be entered and, as a result, cross-community support would be required.

Mr Ford: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, I believe that my response was that not all legislation required a cross-community vote, but that it was possible for particular mechanisms to be triggered. That seems to be, more or less, what you have just told the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I concur with that, but I am not sure that it is a point of order. We have reached the end of the questions to the Minister of Justice on his statement. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments before Question Time commences at 2.30 pm.

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Members may be aware of today's visit to Parliament Buildings by the Presiding Officer of the National Assembly for Wales, Rosemary Butler, and the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament, Tricia Marwick, and their guests. Both Presiding Officers are welcome in the Gallery and in the Assembly. I extend my warmest welcome to you.

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Speaker: I advise Members that questions 1, 7 and 9 have been withdrawn.

Barroso Task Force

2. **Mr Sheehan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they will visit Brussels to advance the work of the Barroso task force.

(AQO 368/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Acting deputy First Minister):

Before I call on the junior Minister to answer the question, I also extend my welcome to our Scottish and Welsh visitors and extend condolences to Mark H Durkan on his family bereavement.

Ms M Anderson (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

The First Minister and deputy First Minister opened the Executive's new Brussels office in December 2010, and they were joined by the president of the European Commission, President Barroso. At that time, the president firmly renewed his support for the Barroso task force and announced a follow-on visit by his senior officials to Belfast. That marked the start of renewed engagement with the EU at both ministerial and official level, commencing with a successful inward visit by the Commission to Belfast in March. Since then, the Executive have agreed and published their European priorities in the 'Winning in Europe' document, and the First Minister and deputy First Minister presented those to Commissioner Hahn when he visited the peace bridge in Derry in June.

The Commissioner's presence and commitment during the event to support a further Peace programme — Peace IV — were clear examples of the assistance that President Barroso had in mind. The task force will be a key resource on which we can draw support in delivering our European priorities. To reinforce those efforts, junior Minister Bell and I will review progress in Brussels in discussions with Commission officials in the autumn. We will also engage with a range of European officials on further discussions that will benefit the North, and we plan to meet the Commission's task force

chairperson to continue discussions on enhancing that work.

I know that the First Minister and deputy First Minister greatly valued their most recent visit to Brussels in December 2010, and, while there are no immediate plans for them to visit again, junior Minister Bell and I will travel to Brussels next month. When we come back, we will report to the First Minister and deputy First Minister. After that, we foresee that a return visit by the First Minister and deputy First Minister will be desirable to build on the positive relations established to date with senior EU leaders.

Mr Speaker: I remind Ministers of the two-minute time limit on answering questions.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Can the Minister give us an update on the peace-building and conflict resolution centre at the Long Kesh site?

Ms M Anderson: As the Member will know, the proposed peace-building and conflict resolution centre will focus on promoting and encouraging peace-building across the globe. A £20 million European Peace III application was submitted to the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) on 14 January 2011, and a decision is expected in November. If that is successful, it is intended that the centre will be built and operational by 2015.

Mr Humphrey: Very recently, officials from the Department and the SEUPB appeared before the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Is the Minister confident that there will be a Peace IV programme for Northern Ireland?

Ms M Anderson: I had the privilege of attending the meeting that was held when Commissioner Hahn was in Derry with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. During that meeting, they spoke to him about the need for a Peace IV programme. I am definitely confident that we have the support of European Commissioners and the Irish Taoiseach, who also attended the meeting. I accompanied Minister Sammy Wilson to the SEUPB meeting, which was held at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in sectoral format, and, again, the issue was raised there. So, there certainly is a lot of work being done on Peace IV, and the First Minister and the deputy First Minister are driving that forward.

Mr McCallister: Given that the Minister is confident that there is a commitment to Peace IV, does she think that it will be in place by the time Peace III runs out in 2013?

Ms M Anderson: One would imagine that that is the intention. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister are also engaging with the British Government to secure support from them. Minister Bell and I are the Ministers who go to the JMC in Europe, and, at our meeting there a few months ago, we raised the issue of Peace IV. There certainly is a lot of work to do, and further work needs to be done by the First Minister and deputy First Minister to secure the British Government's support for Peace IV.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister accept that formal negotiations with the British Government are crucial in trying to ensure that we have a follow on to Peace III? Can those negotiations be sped up to reach a conclusion more quickly?

Ms M Anderson: Without doubt, that is the case. I hope that my previous answers have given the Member some assurance that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister are working very hard to secure Peace IV. They have had a number of meetings, have engaged with the Commission and the JMC in Europe — through Jonathan Bell and me, as junior Ministers — and have been working with the Irish Taoiseach. So, they are working very hard to secure Peace IV. I hope that Members will get some comfort from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's actions and activities in that regard.

Social Investment Fund

3. **Mrs Hale** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the social investment fund. (AQO 369/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: On 22 March 2011, the Executive agreed the establishment of a social investment fund aimed at reducing poverty and unemployment. The fund recognises that deprivation occurs across a number of areas, and eight possible investment zones have been identified. It is recognised that the government response to issues of economic and social disadvantage needs to break from a silo approach in order to have a long-term impact. Therefore, OFMDFM will still co-ordinate an interdisciplinary approach across all Departments.

We have finalised proposals for the social investment fund, and those will be issued for public consultation in the coming days. It is anticipated that the fund will be based on agreed strategic plans developed by local communities themselves. The communities will be facilitated in developing strategies where necessary, and intervention will focus on joint support of community-based expertise and the strategic and financial input of government. It is proposed that funding totalling £80 million will be allocated to the fund across the Budget period. As has been said before at OFMDFM Question Time, our Department is seeking to address poverty and disadvantage, and, in doing so, we have ensured a budget for not just the social investment fund but the social protection fund and a pilot child poverty reduction study.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for his answer. How does he believe the fund will benefit local communities?

Mr O'Dowd: The fund's scope and priority is to assist local communities. The consultation process will be a valuable time for communities to come forward and tell the Executive and OFMDFM how they believe the fund can be best used. The investment in community infrastructure and local communities is substantial, with £80 million over four years. I think that communities facing disadvantage and pressures will welcome that development. Over the next period of time, the key is to encourage communities to become involved in the consultation and, indeed, elected representatives to bring forward ideas.

Mr Lyttle: Given that a recent survey has shown that one in four older people is spending 15 hours a day or more on their own, will the social investment fund attempt to tackle that type of social poverty?

Mr O'Dowd: Clearly, the social investment fund can be used by older people's groups. I believe that what the Member refers to is, ideally, the social protection fund, which is more individually based. I am aware that OFMDFM is looking at measures that it can implement to individually assist older people who suffer from fuel poverty and other privations. It is important that it is recognised that measures are in place in the Executive to assist not only groups but individuals in communities.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister explain how that fund, which some people might consider a slush fund, will be administered and what the eligibility criteria will be?

Mr O'Dowd: One way to turn communities off applying for a fund is to put political tags on it and to criticise it from the outset: therefore, let us not do that. Let us ensure that all communities have the right and the ability to access that fund. The fund will be used to invest in communities and community infrastructure. It will go out for consultation. It was presented to the Executive last Thursday and will be launched this week. From that exercise, the fund's priorities will be established through the consultation process. I say with respect to the Member, let us not start to attack the fund, which, in the light of a difficult Budget, has set aside £80 million for the most disadvantaged communities. For once, the Assembly can have one voice to welcome an initiative rather than to criticise it before it gets off the ground.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I ask the Minister for an update on the earnings disregard programme.

Mr O'Dowd: OFMDFM officials have been working with other Departments on a child poverty reduction pilot study. The study was planned in advance of announcements in the welfare reform programme that those who work and are on benefits will be able to retain more of their income. Currently, people who are on benefits and in work are allowed to retain a fraction of their income before their benefits are cut on a pound-for-pound basis. Our pilot programme will allow us to assess the difficulties that parents on a low income face in seeking to access the labour market. The lessons that are learned will help us to ensure that we have the necessary infrastructure in place to allow those from low-income families to take up the opportunity of part-time work and, in doing so, help to tackle the number of families and children in poverty. The study aims to measure the reduction in child poverty in low-income families that could result from engagement in a few hours' work without losing benefits. Participants in the programme will receive a modest payment. Departments are co-operating fully. It is expected that the pilot programme will be operational later in 2011.

Maze/Long Kesh: Peace-building and Conflict Resolution Centre

4. **Mr McNarry** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline any research which has been carried out by their office to assess public

opinion in relation to the construction of the proposed peace-building and conflict resolution centre. (AQO 370/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In September 2010, independent consultants were commissioned to develop a business plan and to assess and quantify the market demand for the proposed peace-building and conflict resolution centre. In August 2011, that was further enhanced by the employment of Colliers International to undertake hard market research, which included a survey to test local demand and research to estimate demand from out-of-state visitors. That work is under way, and the results will be known by mid-October.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he provide an update on the current funding application to the Special EU Programmes Body for the conflict resolution centre at the Maze and confirm that the application will be made available to MLAs?

Mr O'Dowd: I understand that, on completion of consideration of the economic appraisal, it is hoped that the outcome of the Peace III funding application to the SEUPB will be known by mid-November. On 14 January, a €20 million Peace III funding application was submitted to the SEUPB. As I said, it should be available in November. As regards whether it will be made available to MLAs, I do not have that specific information in front of me. I will ask that my officials forward that information to the Member. I am not aware of the legalities of the issue, so I do not want to make any further comment at this stage.

Mr Campbell: In trying to determine the public mood towards such a centre, does the Minister agree that, although it is important that particular groups — prison officers, police officers, UDR officers or others who have suffered as a result of terror — approve of that centre, the wider community in whose area it would be based also needs to give it its overall approval?

2.45 pm

Mr O'Dowd: Surely the purpose of a peace-building and conflict resolution centre is to ensure that members of our wider community are comfortable with the project. Clearly, there are challenges for us all in recognising the past and in determining how we move beyond the past. However, this project is as much about the future as the past; it is about us building our way out of conflict.

The benefit to us will not only be local; there will be benefits internationally, which will not only be financial but will come from our input in the global peace process and many societies where there is conflict. This centre allows us to share our experiences with other societies.

It is clear that the wider community will have to be comfortable on the way forward.

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

I thank the Minister for his answers. I welcome the fact that the application has been made and hope that it is successful. The Minister gave some outline of the proposed development. Can he give some indication that this will be something that everyone in Ireland and beyond will want to use?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes, and the interest of the EU in this matter indicates that it has a international impact as well as a local one. The centre, which has EU support, will have a clear and distinct remit and will focus on promoting and encouraging peace-building both here in Ireland and across the globe. The peace-building and conflict resolution centre will be a unique facility in promoting international exchange. It will house research study on economic activities, develop a modern archiving facility and be a place for reflection as well as being a shared space for visitors across performance events and exhibitions.

Mr Eastwood: Has the Department sought the advice and expertise of those involved in peace and conflict studies, such as INCORE in Derry, on this matter?

Mr O'Dowd: There has been widespread consultation, both locally and internationally, on how best to develop this facility. If the Member has any suggestions or believes that there is information or practice in his locality and wants to share that with OFMDFM or the consultants, that would be worthwhile.

Child Poverty Strategy

5. **Mr G Kelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the development of the child poverty strategy action plan.

(AQO 371/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I ask junior Minister Anderson to answer that question.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat.

The child poverty strategy was published on 24 March 2011 and set out the actions proposed by the Executive to address child poverty here. Since the publication of the strategy, junior Minister Bell and I have met representatives of the poverty and social inclusion stakeholder forum and other Departments to discuss possible actions. Our officials are also working with colleagues in other Departments to develop an associated development plan that will detail key initiatives and signature projects to progress the priorities identified in the strategy.

There have also been discussions with key stakeholders about the identification of appropriate actions. Work has been continuing with statisticians and economic colleagues in our Department and other Departments to develop an outcome-based model to monitor progress of the delivery plan towards eradicating child poverty. That was a constant theme that junior Minister Bell and I heard when we were at meetings with stakeholders: they want an outcome-based model.

It is intended that, when the delivery plan has been developed and has gone through the formal approval process, including initial approval by the ministerially led poverty and social inclusion stakeholder forum, it will be issued for public consultation. Junior Minister Bell and I anticipate convening a meeting of the forum in October.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra.

Thank you for the answer. Will the Minister give an update on the last meeting of the poverty and social inclusion stakeholder forum and tell us where that is going now?

Ms M Anderson: The Executive subcommittee on poverty and social inclusion is advised by a ministerially led poverty and social inclusion stakeholder forum, which brings together officials from across Departments and sectoral stakeholders. The forum in full session last met when the Member who asked the question was junior Minister. There was a briefing then with all the members on the child poverty strategy delivery plan. As part of the development of the

delivery plan, junior Minister Bell and I met the non-departmental members of the ministerially led poverty and social inclusion stakeholder forum on 25 July 2011 to seek their views on what they would like to see in the draft child poverty action plan. We then met departmental members of the forum on 18 August to discuss their respective input to the draft plan. It is intended that, when fully developed, the draft delivery plan will be formally presented for approval to the ministerially led poverty and social inclusion forum. Once agreed, it will be issued for consultation, but the views of the OFMDFM Committee will be sought at that time.

Mr Kinahan: Will the Minister give a commitment that the action plan will adequately address high levels of social exclusion and the lack of service provision in rural areas?

Ms M Anderson: That was one of the areas discussed when we met the two groups: the non-departmental members of the stakeholders' forum and its departmental members. They are acutely aware of people's needs, particularly of those in the rural community, and that will be a feature of our discussions.

Mr Agnew: The largest complaint that I hear from the children's sector concerns the failure of Departments to work together on the planning and delivery of children's services. What consideration is being given to a statutory duty to co-operate and, therefore, pool budgets among Departments to deliver children's services?

Ms M Anderson: I am not too sure about the need for a statutory duty to co-operate. What I can tell you is that junior Minister Bell and I are working very hard to make sure that we get the collaborative and co-operative approach that is needed. We recognise that a few Departments are not working in that way. I suggest that you get a sense from your own ministerial colleagues of their input and commitment, because the work that is being done on the ministerial subgroup is cross-party, across all parties on the Executive. If Departments are not working collaboratively, that needs to be brought to your own ministerial colleagues to make sure that they challenge those responsible in their Department to make sure that collaboration happens. We will take on board the need to drive that forward.

Mr McDevitt: Is the junior Minister concerned that some of the many thousands of children in poverty, which the strategy is meant to address, will be adults in poverty by the time that she,

her colleague and the myriad civil servants get around to having fewer meetings about meetings and instead do something about this?

Ms M Anderson: That question does not surprise me. The Member should engage with his own party colleagues on the type of collaborative and cross-cutting work that is going on across Departments. As I said in my earlier answer, which, I hope, you heard and listened to, we are working very hard to develop an outcome model to monitor progress on the delivery plan. People do not want this to be process-based. They want it to be outcome-based, and they want to make sure that the outcome model is tested in a way that demonstrates that we are having an impact. We are working very hard towards that goal.

I suggest that the Member listens to what is said in the Chamber on this matter and perhaps encourages his colleagues to do the same. Perhaps he will be a Minister himself and be able to do that in the Department if he wins. If that is the case, he will be able to work with us to make sure that we get the outcomes for those who need them most: children who might have gone to school today without proper shoes on their feet, a proper coat on their back and even without a proper breakfast. This is too serious an issue for the Member to make such a swiping comment.

Programme for Government

6. **Mr Dickson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on discussions on the Programme for Government. (AQO 372/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The draft Programme for Government has been discussed in the Chamber and in the Executive in the past few days. Although the timing of the document has been preoccupying Members, I again stress that the Executive's priority is to produce a Programme for Government that reflects the parameters of the budgetary settlement while simultaneously being capable of progressing and ultimately delivering real and lasting positive change to people here.

It would be remiss of us, as politicians, to produce a Programme for Government that was not in concert with a Budget and disregarded the financial constraints that we face. The First Minister and I are pleased to have brought a draft of the Programme for Government to the point of being able to share it with Ministers and party leaders. That draft is the result of several

months of work behind the scenes by Ministers and officials, who have canvassed the views and listened to the opinions of a wide range of stakeholders and sectoral representatives. However, the First Minister and I are of the view that much more work is needed to improve the current draft. That is why we also wanted to share it with party leaders, who, we hope, will bring it to their respective parties and come back to us with their own ideas. The document has also been circulated to Departments for further comment and input.

We intend to bring a revised copy of the PFG to the Executive meeting on 6 October with a view to issuing it for public consultation as soon as possible thereafter. Of course, our capacity to do that is determined to a great extent by the co-operation shown by Departments, Ministers and political parties in producing and agreeing a final draft for public consultation. The final Programme for Government must be characterised as delivery focused with an emphasis on partnership, collaboration and common purpose in progressing our priorities. Those priorities, which are at the heart of what we do, are growing the sustainable economy, tackling disadvantage, creating opportunities, improving health and well-being and protecting our people and environment.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his answer but regret that he has not mentioned the social cost of division. Can we be assured, Minister, that you will seriously commit to tackling the social cost of division in this community in the Programme for Government?

Mr O'Dowd: The fact that the First Minister and I are standing here today and sharing these posts, that we are in the Assembly today and that we have a political process today is tackling social division. The Programme for Government has been shared with all Ministers and leaders of political parties, so there is an opportunity for the Member to respond to it.

The cohesion, sharing and integration strategy is also moving forward. The parties will come together again tomorrow to discuss that initiative. A programme of work on all these matters is being rolled out. The Programme for Government is clearly overarching, but work is ongoing on several elements that I believe will reach the goal that the Member wants.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an LeasChéad

Aire chuig a chéad Tráth na gCeist. Maith thú. We have heard reports in the media that the direct air link to the United States may be under threat. The impact on the economy would be drastic. Will you inform us what we have done on that?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for her question and kind comments. A lot of work has been done on that matter. The discontinuation of the direct air link to the United States would be damaging to the economy here and would have a negative impact on future investment from the United States. US companies play a vital role in the economy of the North and have created many jobs over the past number of years. We are confident that more investment will come from the US in the years ahead. Some of those companies have expressed concern at the reported loss of our direct link to New York and at how that would have a negative impact on our business.

As we know, the concern over the direct route centres on the high rate of air passenger duty being absorbed by the airline that operates the route. Over recent months, we have made a concerted effort to ensure that the issue of the direct air route and the negative impact on the air passenger duty has been raised with the British Treasury and the Prime Minister. We have put forward the case for devolving air passenger duty, and our campaign has been supported widely by public representatives both here and in the United States. I understand that, as a result of the substantial work carried out by the First Minister and Martin McGuinness on their recent trip to America and of the other work that has been done since then, we await a statement from the Treasury, hopefully later today. We hope and expect that that statement will be positive.

Mr Swann: Given the deputy First Minister's current dual roles, can he indicate whether a revised Programme for Government will give any direction on shared education?

Mr O'Dowd: The Programme for Government is up for grabs in that sense, as it is with all issues. As I said, the draft is with Ministers and party leaders. Any party or individual Member who wishes to come back with commentary on education or any other matter is perfectly free to do so.

The Programme for Government awaits agreement. The quicker the parties, the Ministers and

the Executive work at that, the quicker that agreement will be achieved.

3.00 pm

Mr D Bradley: Gabhaim buíochas leis an LeasChéad Aire as an fhreagra a thug sé. It is my clear impression that the draft Programme for Government is largely couched in generalities and in phrases such as “to promote”, “to seek to find new innovative ways”, — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr D Bradley: — “to seek to address the challenges”, and so on.

Mr Speaker: The Member should ask a question.

Mr D Bradley: My question is this: can we hope, in the final version of the Programme for Government, to see more specific aims matched to the resources available?

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

Mr O'Dowd: Your destiny, in that sense, Mr Bradley, lies in your own hands. As I said in my original answer, the First Minister and I are of the view that much more work is need to improve the current draft. Hence, we have circulated the draft document to party leaders and all Ministers. Anyone wishing to come forward with radical, workable proposals will, I am sure, not be turned away from the Executive table.

Social Development

Mortgage Rescue Scheme

1. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the provision of a mortgage relief scheme. (AQO 382/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I am pleased to report that I was able to launch a contracted mortgage debt advice service during the summer. The contract can operate until March 2015 at the latest. The service is helping those experiencing difficulty making their mortgage payments from undergoing the distressing prospect of court action and possible repossession of their homes. By providing homeowners with appropriate debt advice and supporting them in discussions with their lenders, the mortgage debt advice service is helping them to remain in home ownership

and retain financial independence and capacity during a difficult time, thereby preventing further pressures on an already strained public purse.

The additional funding, amounting to over £500,000 over the contract, has increased the level of service available, making it easier and more convenient for homeowners struggling with debt to access advice. Extended contact hours are in place on Tuesdays and Thursdays and a new online adviser facility is now available.

Mr Speaker: Just to alert the House; question 15 has been withdrawn.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. Does the Minister not agree that more and more people are set to lose their homes due to the savage cuts in welfare reform legislation being imposed by the coalition Government in Britain? The longer we delay implementing a scheme to help in some way, the more people will end up homeless. The question I am really asking is this: what is the Minister doing about the delay in setting up the scheme?

Mr McCausland: I explained in my initial answer about our mortgage debt advice service, which is clearly designed to help people in very difficult situations.

The Member also makes reference to a mortgage rescue scheme. The fact is that from June 2008 to June 2011 monitoring rounds have taken place and my Department has consistently bid for between £4 million and £5 million funding in respect of a mortgage rescue scheme. However, it is important to note that introducing the intervention element of a mortgage rescue scheme would assist only a relatively small number of people and would cost several million pounds to operate. For example, if we did get £4,250,000 a year, that would accommodate approximately 72 rescues.

I am conscious that there is a limited pot of money for Northern Ireland. As such, money for mortgage rescue would therefore mean, for example, that health and education projects could not proceed.

I make two points in response to the question. First, we have bid for the money but it has not been available to the Department, even though bids have been made consistently. Secondly, if we did get the money, it would have a very modest impact indeed, with perhaps only 72 rescues out of the hundreds of people who find

themselves in difficult circumstances. The vast majority would not be accommodated. If the money were available, it would be coming from health, education and other important sectors.

Ms Lewis: What impact did the additional resources for providing specialist advice through the mortgage debt advice service have on preventing repossessions?

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for her question. I am pleased to report that the advice service is bringing significant benefits to people in financial difficulty. Quite often, interventions are made at a late stage, when people are already in front of the courts, so the advice is critical. Interim analysis indicates that, over the past five months, the service has provided help to 434 clients and directly prevented the homelessness of 108. When an intervention worked, it brought huge benefit to individual families. I suggest that anyone who thinks that they are in danger of losing their home ensure that they take immediate action. They should contact their lender to discuss the position and seek independent advice, such as that offered by the mortgage debt advice service.

Mr Byrne: Will the Minister provide an update on the state of the co-ownership scheme? What level of funding is being allocated to it to help potential applicants?

Mr McCausland: Over the past number of weeks, I have had conversations with the Co-ownership Housing Association, not simply about direct co-ownership but also about other programmes that we might consider taking forward together. The association's budget has been secured for the coming year, and we are discussing with it a potential extension of the interventions that might be possible. I hope to move on that, and there should be an announcement very soon.

Neighbourhood Renewal

2. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the success of neighbourhood renewal. (AQO 383/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his question. The neighbourhood renewal programme has been successful on a number of levels. It has brought communities and government together to develop and deliver agreed action plans that seek to tackle the causes of deprivation in 36 of our most disadvantaged areas. Since the 10-year strategy was launched

in 2003, it has delivered significant additional services and facilities in those most deprived areas, thereby enhancing the quality of life of those living there. One notable success of the programme is, I suggest, that it has gained support across all political parties, as was the case in the Chamber last November.

The recent review of neighbourhood renewal detailed improvements in the 36 areas since the beginning of the programme. However, it also highlighted weaknesses and indicated that much still needed to be done, particularly in response to the current economic downturn. A particular area of concern has been that efforts by a number of statutory bodies to address various aspects of deprivation have not been as well integrated as they could and should be. Therefore, there has not been sufficient focus on changing the economic prospects of those areas. There have also been recurrent difficulties with some statutory organisations genuinely engaging in delivering change through neighbourhood renewal. I will ensure that at least all parts of the Department for Social Development (DSD) family, including the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, work together to ensure integrated delivery, and I will raise the wider issue with Executive colleagues. The next round of funding of projects under neighbourhood renewal will focus on delivering effective services in the most efficient way possible. DSD will also reflect on the key lessons from neighbourhood renewal as we restart work on a new urban regeneration and community development framework destined for implementation in 2014.

Since the 2003 launch of the programme, 36 partnerships have been formed, neighbourhood plans agreed and actions implemented. The mid-term review detailed a narrowing of the gap between neighbourhood renewal areas and the rest of Northern Ireland. During a debate on 30 November, neighbourhood renewal also received support from all political parties, and the programme was allocated £20 million revenue per annum under the current comprehensive spending review period. Projects that receive funding for DSD must demonstrate that they address a need in an efficacious manner. The recurrent problems that some statutory bodies in some areas have engaging with neighbourhood partnerships and supporting integrated delivery will be addressed.

Mr Easton: Will the Minister outline what difficulties he sees with the neighbourhood renewal programme? It would be remiss of me not to mention the Kilcooley estate in Bangor.

Mr McCausland: I would be deeply disappointed — traumatised, even — if the Member did not mention the Kilcooley estate in Bangor. Although neighbourhood renewal has achieved much and there are examples of excellent practice, there are weaknesses that I wish to see addressed in the current programme so we can build the results into successor programmes.

The weaknesses include too much money being expended in supporting the core costs of organisations rather than on their delivery, and not enough emphasis on changing the economic fundamentals of the area, as one of the keys to addressing deprivation is to encourage and support people into employment. There are weaknesses in relation to the ability and willingness of some neighbourhood renewal partnerships to create radical and deliverable plans, and there is quite a variation across the neighbourhood renewal areas in the quality and content of the plans.

Other weaknesses include patchy participation of some key statutory agencies in some local areas; the need to improve alignment in some areas with other initiatives that impact on poor health, educational attainment, worklessness and economic vitality; and a lack of broad, local political engagement. That happens in some areas and not in others, and I want to look at that as we move forward with neighbourhood renewal.

I believe that the more involvement there is with the whole community — the community sector, statutory agencies, the business and political communities — the more successful programmes such as this will be. I know the Member has particular concerns about the Kilcooley estate. He has raised issues with me about Kilcooley Women's Centre, and I will write to him on those points.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for pointing out that this 10-year scheme is drawing to a close with weaknesses that might be summarised as an emphasis on process over outcomes. What is the Minister doing to effect the cultural change in the statutory bodies that will put the focus back on outcomes?

Mr McCausland: I point out to the Member that the difficulties are not simply with the statutory agencies. If he listened carefully, he would have heard me be very specific about that. There are weaknesses with regard to statutory agencies, but there are weaknesses in other areas of the programme. The issue, for example, of having a coherent, holistic and imaginative plan for each area is the kind of thing that I am talking about.

I visited areas in different constituencies to talk to neighbourhood renewal partnerships and saw quite a variation. For example, in some areas, delivery of projects for young people is quite strong and in other areas it is quite weak. In some areas the programmes are extensive, really imaginative and exciting, and in other areas they are quite conservative. There is a need to work with statutory agencies, but there is also a need to work with and support local communities. That is why we carried out a mid-term review and that is why we are looking at the shaping of neighbourhood renewal in the future. An announcement will be made about that in due course.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I remind the Minister that the Committee for Social Development carried out an inquiry into neighbourhood renewal and made quite a number of suggestions, none of which was taken up by the Department. Does he agree that the biggest single failure on the development of neighbourhood renewal —

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

Mr F McCann: The failure of the development of neighbourhood renewal lay with Departments not playing their part. In fact, there was a lack of leadership in his Department in the past, and from a departmental point of view —

Mr Speaker: The Minister has got the gist of the question.

Mr McCausland: I am sure that many people will have comments on how this programme has been delivered under previous Ministers. I do not want to dwell on the past; we want to look forward on this, as I am sure the Member does. The mid-term review that I spoke about sits alongside the Committee for Social Development's report. We are looking at both; it is not as if the Committee's report has been cast aside. Others may not have paid the same attention, but I am determined to do so.

The reports will be considered together and we have a number of recommendations that will form a comprehensive programme for improving neighbourhood renewal. Those recommendations include: developing better links with agencies and with other policies operating on a broader spatial scale, particularly in regard to economic development; stronger emphasis on reducing worklessness; and developing new models of delivery that bring together regeneration resources and mainstream spending in a more complementary way. Projects that do not display the ability to contribute to agreed outcomes should not continue to be supported.

More effective methods of achieving outcomes should be found, and the focus must be on delivery for the local community. Finally, the success of regeneration should be measured by the outcomes that it delivers, not the activities that are carried out, with a primary focus on improving economic outcomes.

3.15 pm

Mr Eastwood: Will the Minister give an assessment of how other Departments have participated in neighbourhood renewal?

Mr McCausland: One of the real tests in such things is putting your money on the table. Bear in mind that neighbourhood renewal was initially an Executive initiative. It is led by DSD, but it is a cross-departmental initiative. We need to see other Departments looking at how they can skew resources and put in additional support in a complementary, coherent way right across the Departments.

I do not want to pick out particular Departments and say that A has done really well and B has done badly. I will not go down that road, but I will simply say that all Departments should be looking at neighbourhood renewal as something in which they have a role to play, whether it is in the areas of education, further education, health, or whatever it is. What can we do right across all the Departments, including the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and so on? All the Departments have something that they can contribute.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Social Housing: Lower Newtownards Road, Belfast

4. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister for Social Development what steps his Department has taken to address the social housing issues that are being faced by residents in the lower Newtownards Road area of Belfast as a result of the 2011 summer disturbances. (AQO 385/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I visited the lower Newtownards Road area in the aftermath of the recent disturbances and saw for myself the damage caused and the problems for the residents living in that area. I wholeheartedly condemn the violence that occurred, and I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the Member and others working on both sides of the interface in an effort to reduce tensions.

This is primarily a community safety issue, and my Department is working closely with the Department of Justice and the interface residents initiative in an effort to identify what more needs to be done to protect tenants living in the area. A great deal of work has been done already, such as the replacement of broken roof tiles and windows, and oil-fired heating systems have been replaced with gas in five properties where it was deemed that the oil tanks caused a potential risk. Smoke detectors have been fitted in the roofs of a number of properties, and a thorough clean-up of the area has taken place. Further work is planned, such as the replacement of roof tiles on some properties with metal tiles and the fitting of window grilles. I was pleased to hear the local community commend the response of the Housing Executive and Habinteg housing association to the issues that residents faced in recent times.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his answer. Some of those local communities that he talked about are very frustrated at the moment, because, although there is an acknowledgement that much progress has been made, there has been slow action from some of the other housing providers. What action does the Minister propose to take to ensure that progress is made and made quickly?

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I referred to the positive feedback from the local community on the efforts that the Housing Executive and Habinteg housing association have made in that

area. I believe that they have set the benchmark that all housing providers must follow, and nothing less than that will be accepted.

Senior officials have met with various housing providers and have written to each of them setting out how I expect them to respond to the issues that residents face. Habinteg housing association has already carried out over £17,000 of work on its properties in Duke Street. In conclusion, tenants' safety must be its top priority. I am keeping its response to the situation under very close review.

Mr Copeland: I echo the sentiments of my colleague on my left. Is it possible at this stage to estimate, in money terms, the total amount of damage occasioned during those occurrences and where the money to effect repairs is actually coming from? Will it come from the resources of the Housing Executive or, perhaps, the housing associations? If so, does that not act against the other people who have an expectation that that money might be spent on other things during the course of a year? Is it the intention of his Department to assist any of those people?

Mr McCausland: The Member will be well aware that I am not in a position to invent money or conjure it out of thin air. Any money that is taken by the Housing Executive or a housing association to deal with a particular issue must come from the budgets of the relevant organisations. Since there is a finite amount of money, the result is that it is taken away from something else. I am sure that the Member would not question that. I can comment only on the cost of the work that has been carried out so far. The final figures have not yet been established, but to date, our social landlords have spent in the region of £30,000 to secure residents' homes. The further work that is planned is estimated to cost £60,000, and will include the provision of metallic roofs on some properties on the Newtownards Road and Thistle Court, and the replacement of Lexan glass in Cluan Place.

Mr McDevitt: I echo colleagues' concerns about the inaction of a small but significant number of agencies. What specific duty does the Minister feel that he and the Housing Executive have to promote community safety in that part of our city? What steps will his Department take between now and next year to try to avert a repetition of this summer's activities?

Mr McCausland: The issues on that particular interface are long standing and go back long before the summer to the period when my predecessor, Alex Attwood, and his predecessor, Margaret Ritchie, were in the Department. The situation is nothing new. I am sure that the Member would agree. We need to look back at what has been done by my predecessors, what we are doing at the moment and what we will do. In addition, we need to take note of the fact that, as the Member said, this is a community safety issue. A number of Departments, including the Department of Justice, have a role in addressing community safety. My Department has a contributory role, and we need to move forward in a cross-departmental way. As is the case with neighbourhood renewal, there are many issues in Northern Ireland, because of the nature of our Executive system, that are cross-departmental. I want to see things being taken forward in that way. There is a role for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) in improving community relationships through funding for the Community Relations Council, and so on. There is a whole range of initiatives that need to be taken forward together in a coherent and collaborative way.

Cancer Patients: Fuel Payments

5. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister for Social Development whether he has had any discussions with his Executive colleagues regarding funding that might be available under the social protection fund which would enable fuel payments to be made to people receiving cancer treatments.

(AQO 386/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Member will be aware that the social protection fund is an OFMDFM-led scheme that is designed to assist those most in need in the wider community. I am, nonetheless, engaging with Executive colleagues to determine how best to use the social protection fund to target those householders who are most affected by the recent gas and electricity price rises. I am conscious that the announcements by Power NI and Firmus Energy will place added pressure on people struggling with household budgets. I expect to announce plans for the funding available under the social protection fund in the very near future.

Ms Boyle: I thank the Minister for his answer. What action does he intend to take to ensure that those who are entitled to payment receive

it in time and do not have to go through the rigours of red tape and bureaucracy?

Mr McCausland: Beyond Santa Claus handing out gifts without any red tape or forms to fill in, it is not the normal situation with governments that we just hand money out willy-nilly. There has to be a process, and the Member will recognise that. However, we want to keep the process as simple as possible, and, when the initiative is announced for the expenditure under the social protection fund, I am sure that the Member will be reassured that, indeed, we have kept it as simple and accessible as possible. The other thing is to ensure that people are well informed about what is being made available. Information and simplicity are key.

Mr Campbell: Will the Minister assure the House that, as the process of the social protection fund unfolds, he will, in so far as is possible, target those who are most in need so that maximum protection is offered to them?

Mr McCausland: Getting the money to the people who need it most has to be our priority. We currently face a difficult time in regard to fuel poverty. I want to do all that I can, but the social protection fund is not the be-all and end-all. For example, I am considering bidding for additional funding in the October monitoring round to enable the Housing Executive to replace single-glazed windows in a number of its properties with double glazing and additional insulation measures to ensure warmth. I expect the Housing Executive to step up to the mark and ensure that as many of its properties as possible are double-glazed over the coming winter and in subsequent years.

The energy efficiency of homes is related to fuel poverty. Double glazing is an excellent way to deal with that. I understand that only 40% of the Housing Executive's stock of 90,000 are double-glazed. Sixty per cent of its properties are single-glazed, and, in some areas, up to 70% of its properties are single-glazed. I intend to bid for that money, and I will meet the Housing Executive to see what we can do to get the maximum delivery on the ground and the maximum amount of money out there to get double glazing in those homes. We can take forward that major development, with additional insulation measures, to ensure warmth in homes and cut fuel costs and fuel poverty.

Mr Allister: Does the Minister agree that delivery would be far more efficient if the social

protection fund lay in his Department, where it rightly belongs, rather than under the aegis of OFMDFM? Is that one of the reasons why, six months into the financial year, there has been no spend under that fund?

Mr McCausland: There are some folk who, with the best will in the world, can always find the most negative thing in anything. The Member certainly excels himself in that regard. It is vital to make sure that we get the best outcome and delivery. We are in September, so we are coming to the period of the year in which the issue of fuel poverty comes to the fore because of the cold weather. The announcement will be made very soon and will, therefore, be in place for the period of the year when the need is greatest. It is not particularly an issue over the summer or sunny months, although it is not particularly sunny in Northern Ireland; the problem arises over the winter months. The measure will be in place for that period, so nothing will be lost in that regard.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Will he detail whether the Executive have identified any additional revenue streams to resource the social protection fund after 2011-12?

Mr McCausland: The Member seems to focus very much on the issue of the social protection fund. The danger is that the central issue will become putting money into people's pockets to pay for fuel. That is important, but the bigger issue is trying to address energy efficiency. I have recently visited homes in a number of places, and I was up in Carnlough the other day. There are newly built homes there that have energy efficiency such that the fuel bills are cut by around half. That is much better because it lasts year on year; you do not have to go back with a grant year on year. If we can keep the focus much more on how we address energy efficiency, we will have a better outcome for people who suffer from fuel poverty at this time.

Housing Executive: Contractors

6. **Mr S Anderson** asked the Minister for Social Development what quality assurance arrangements are in place to monitor and evaluate the work that is carried out on social housing by contractors employed by the Housing Executive. (AQO 387/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The quality of work that is carried out by Housing Executive contractors

is very important for its tenants and for the taxpayers of this country.

In recent weeks, I have asked my officials to carry out a forensic investigation of a sample of Housing Executive response maintenance contracts to provide me with assurance that contractors are carrying out their work to a quality standard.

3.30 pm

The Housing Executive has in place a number of quality control systems to monitor and evaluate all work that is carried out on response, planned maintenance and heating installations. Those include pre- and post-inspections, key performance indicators, tenants' surveys and audits of work completed by contractors. However, as the issue around one particular contractor earlier in the year highlighted, there are major shortcomings in the outworking of that, and the forensic audit will bring to light a number of issues that we will then be able to address. That is why I have asked for that to be carried out.

From speaking to Members, I know that, in many cases, issues around housing and the Housing Executive, including repairs and allocation, form a major part of the work that comes into an average constituency office. I am sure that the Member will share that experience. Therefore, we need to ensure that the systems that are in place are fit for purpose, that, organisationally, we are fit for purpose, and that we are delivering a good standard and a good service to all Housing Executive tenants.

Mr Speaker: That ends Question Time. I ask the House to take its ease before we move to the next item of business.

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

Executive Committee Business

Protection of Freedoms Bill: Legislative Consent

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions dealing with freedom of information contained in Part 6 of the Protection of Freedoms Bill as amended in Committee in the House of Commons.

The Protection of Freedoms Bill was introduced to the House of Commons on 11 February 2011 and contains two chief provisions in Part 6 that require a legislative consent motion if they are to extend to Northern Ireland. The first builds on the requirement for public authorities to maintain publication schemes under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 by introducing a right to request data sets. The second extends amendments made to the Freedom of Information Act by the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 regarding the reduction of the 30-year rule to 20 years. Greater transparency is at the heart of both provisions, which commit the Executive to open themselves up to greater scrutiny and allow the public to hold public authorities to account.

There are other incentives. Freedom of information legislation is being expanded to ensure that public authorities publish data sets for reuse and do so in a reusable format, whether in response to a request or through their publication schemes. That will help to deliver better value for money in public spending and bring economic benefits by enabling businesses and individuals to exploit government data sets for commercial and social purposes. The key principle at the heart of the right to data provision is that the taxpayer has paid for the collection of the data and should not have to pay again. Therefore, public authorities are expected to make the information freely available or at minimal cost in a reusable format, where reasonably practicable.

Moreover, authorities are encouraged to publish regularly requested data sets proactively via publication schemes in order to reduce the

administrative costs associated with processing requests. That said, public authorities, which are required to operate in a commercial manner in order to cover their costs, may continue to use existing statutory powers to charge, and, to accommodate future needs and circumstances, a power to make new regulations to enable charging is provided for in the Bill.

The availability of official information is to be extended through another route. Most official records are made available to the public by the time they are 30 years old. That has been the case in Northern Ireland since 1976 when the rule was introduced here by the then Secretary of State Merlyn Rees. However, in recent years, there has been much discussion and consultation about whether historical records can be made available for public inspection substantially sooner. The need to look again at current arrangements has been driven by the irony that information available on requests relating to current events and current decisions is still withheld as a matter of course for similar events and similar occasions that happened decades ago.

The Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 instituted the amendments to facilitate the reduction of what is commonly known as the 30-year rule to 20 years. However, the amendments applied only to England and Wales as there was not sufficient time to obtain a legislative consent motion before the general election of 2010. The Protection of Freedoms Bill, which is being managed by the Home Office, presents a legislative opportunity for the provisions reducing the point at which official records are released publicly to extend to Northern Ireland, as they have yet to be commenced. If extended to Northern Ireland, the provisions would reduce the lifespan of a number of exemptions in the Freedom of Information Act 2000 from 30 to 20 years. For example, records concerning investigations conducted by public authorities or those concerning the formulation of government policy would be released after 20 years instead of 30.

One exception is being made to the rule so as to afford a greater measure of protection for official records that contain information that is particularly sensitive. That is information that would impact negatively on the continuing political process here if disclosed. Therefore, if information is deemed to be of the type that, if released, would prejudice the effective

conduct of public affairs in Northern Ireland or the work of the Executive, the bar on release would remain at 30 years. Under section 36 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000, that judgement is made by the qualified person, who is the Minister in charge of the Department that holds the information in question or, in the case of a Whitehall Department of State, any Minister of the Crown.

The reduction of the time span within which information and historical records can be exempt from release to 20 years would not require any complementary amendment to the Public Records Act (Northern Ireland) 1923, as that legislation already provides for the transfer of official records to the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland at the 20-year point.

There will be some resource implications for the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland and the Departments. To offset them, the freedom of information provisions in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 provide for the phased introduction of the 20-year rule over a 10-year period commencing in 2013. In practice, that will mean that two years' worth of records are brought forward each year for sensitivity review until the 20-year rule is implemented fully by 2023. Additional costs that arise will form part of the Executive's budget and will be absorbed. Careful management, including the introduction of new procedures governing official records, will ensure that standards are maintained while greater volumes of information are processed in a cost-effective manner.

A legislative consent motion is required in relation to clauses 98, 99, 100, 101(5), 103(3) and 103(4) in Part 6 of the Protection of Freedoms Bill.

Clause 98 enables the release and publication of datasets. Clause 100 repeals those parts of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 that exclude Northern Ireland public authorities from the freedom of information provisions relating to the disclosure of historical records and communications with the Royal Family.

There are other, less substantial freedom of information provisions in the Bill that require a legislative consent motion. Clause 99 amends the definition of "publicly-owned company" in section 6 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 so that it extends to companies wholly owned by more than one public authority.

Clause 101(5) repeals spent provisions in the Freedom of Information Act about the period of office of the Data Collection Commissioner as the first Information Commissioner.

Finally, clause 103(3) and (4) amend section 47 of the Freedom of Information Act, which concerns the general functions of the Information Commissioner.

United Kingdom Government Ministers have consulted fully with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister about the proposed amendments to the Freedom of Information Act, and, as the provisions are of cross-departmental interest, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister consulted all Executive Ministers before the summer recess and received their endorsement. The support of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) was also sought and received.

In conclusion, I hope that I have outlined sufficiently the nature and scope of the provisions that require the consent of the Assembly, and I now commend the legislative consent motion to the House.

Mr Elliott (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I will be brief. At its meeting on Wednesday 29 June, the Committee of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister received a briefing from departmental officials on the legislative consent motion. Members were content for the legislative consent motion to proceed, and, as no issues were raised, there was no obvious need for the creation of a Committee report on the matter. Therefore, the Committee supported the legislative consent motion.

Mr Eastwood: I, too, will speak briefly in support of the motion. However, the Bill raises one glaring difficulty that we have in information-sharing between our two police forces on this island. There is no legislative framework to allow for so-called soft intelligence to be passed between an Garda Síochána and the PSNI. Therefore, the potential exists for a serious criminal from, for example, Lifford to live in Strabane, yet no information could be passed from the gardaí to the PSNI. I ask the Minister to bring that matter to his Executive colleagues to do something about it. There are talks in the South about that issue, but no timescale is involved. I encourage the Minister to bring —

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he accept that it does not take legislation to do that? Quite often, the PSNI and the gardai co-operate between their two jurisdictions in a practical manner, and that is probably more beneficial than simply having legislative proposals.

Mr Eastwood: I accept that, but it is important to have that enshrined in legislation. We know that there are serious difficulties. It is a small country. People can cross the border easily. I think that it is important that, for example, known paedophiles, if they operate across the border, be known to the police in Northern Ireland. I just encourage the Minister to work with his Executive and Dáil Éireann colleagues to ensure that that gap is plugged.

Mr Allister: The one area of concern that I have is with why Northern Ireland is a special exception from the 30-/20-year rule, because that will not apply elsewhere. Therefore, whose blushes are we trying to spare over the coming years over how these institutions were established and operate? Are they the blushes of Sinn Féin over its past? Or are they the blushes of the DUP over, for example, the bogus suggestion that there was a plan B, when anyone with any wit knows that there was no plan B? Is that what we are trying to protect from getting into the public domain until some of the players responsible for that deception are long off the political scene?

There is scant or no justification for the special exception on political grounds for Northern Ireland to maintain the 30-year rule when it becomes a 20-year rule everywhere else.

3.45 pm

Mr Bell: I will endeavour to deal with those points in turn. As Executive Ministers, our thanks go to the OFMDFM Committee for its prompt consideration of the issue and for its co-operation in helping us to get a piece of good law. It was said earlier that there are those who can scent poison in everything; however, this is a piece of good news. It allows for government to be more open and transparent, and it allows information to be passed out directly in reusable formats that will benefit the public and wider society in their interactions with government, and that is what I want. I thank the members of the OFMDFM Committee for considering the matter and giving us the prompt response that has

allowed us to bring the work together and to bring the legislative consent motion here today.

Valid points were raised by Mr Eastwood. While addressing the SDLP Benches, the sympathy and prayers of many on the DUP Benches and of us all go to Mr Durkan and his family at this time. Mr Eastwood raised points on co-operation. I am not sure whether they are specific to this legislation, but they are valid points that can be taken up by colleagues on the Policing Board. I congratulate the Garda Síochána and the Police Service of Northern Ireland for co-operating fully on the work that I saw being done for a considerable period last year. As a result, that proactive work has put a stop to bombs and weaponry that could have led to the death or injury of our people. Anything that can be done between the police force here and the guards should be done, and I will endeavour to have that raised directly with the Minister of Justice and the Policing Board. From my experience on the Policing Board, co-operation between the guards and the police has been at a significantly high level, and that was verified by the Chief Constable. I am confident that that will continue for the protection of us all.

Mr Allister made a number of points, some which might even have been relevant. However, that will be for the Ministers and the public authorities in England and Wales to determine.

In conclusion, the freedom of information provisions in the Protection of Freedoms Bill seek to promote greater transparency and economic and social gains through the release of official data and through the reduction from 30 to 20 years when complete records are released into the public domain. The aim is to strike a better balance between openness, affordability and the protection of information. With Members' support, a consistent approach across the United Kingdom to the release of information and the equality of information rights to its citizens is achievable. Therefore, I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions dealing with freedom of information contained in Part 6 of the Protection of Freedoms Bill as amended in Committee in the House of Commons.

Committee Business

Committee Membership

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

Resolved:

That Mr Mike Nesbitt replace Mrs Sandra Overend as a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister; that Mr Michael Copeland replace Mr Mike Nesbitt as a member of the Committee for Regional Development; that Mrs Sandra Overend replace Mr Mike Nesbitt as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee; and that Mrs Sandra Overend replace Mr Michael Copeland as a member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. — [Mr McCallister.]

Private Members' Business

Energy Prices

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item of business on the Order Paper is the motion on energy prices. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes in which to propose the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose the amendment and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Flanagan: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the severe financial pressure on families and small businesses from the recent increase in energy prices; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to liaise with the Utility Regulator and the large energy companies to ensure fair and affordable pricing for energy.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom an rún seo a mholadh, agus tá áthas orm é a chur faoi bhráid an Tionóil. I note that an amendment has been tabled. We are willing to accept that amendment in order to avoid dividing the House. This is such an important issue, it is vital that we present a unified voice to the community.

The motion speaks of the severe financial pressures that are facing families and small businesses. Many are often left with a choice of whether to heat or eat. That is a choice that I have had to make, and many's an evening I have been forced to use a Superser in my house to try to heat it, as a fill of oil was completely out of my reach. In fact, being an MLA who takes home only the average industrial wage, I am not that far above it at the minute. That is the reality for many in our community, and many of those points were well made in last week's debate on fuel poverty.

Spiralling energy prices need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. The motion calls for the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to liaise with the Utility Regulator in order to ensure fair and affordable pricing for energy. That is not too much for any member of our community to ask. That is why they have elected

us to this place; they want us to ensure that everything that can be done on these key issues is done.

In recent weeks, consumers have faced a barrage of announcements on price rises. Phoenix has put its prices up by 40%; Firmus is putting its prices up by one third; electricity is going up by 18.6%; and coal is going up by 10%. The only good news for people in rural areas is that the price of turf is not going up, but, unfortunately, thanks to diesel price rises, it may as well be.

There is a huge amount of profiteering and greed within the energy industry. Recent newspaper coverage, for instance, revealed that the chief executive of Firmus Energy earns an annual salary of over £700,000. I am sure that he does not worry too much about whether to put on the heating for an extra hour, whether to light a fire or whether to get a steak dinner. Likewise, AES, the company that owns Kilroot and Ballylumford power stations, makes an annual profit of some £50 million on a turnover of £156 million. That is a profit ratio of some 32%, which is a massive return on any company's investment. How the energy regulator or the Enterprise Minister have failed to tackle that issue is beyond me, and I am interested to hear her thoughts on that at the end of the discussion.

In these challenging economic times, most small business owners would be happy enough not to make a loss and to be able to draw a decent wage out of their business, let alone make such huge profits compared with their annual turnover. Recession or not, all energy suppliers continue to post increasing profits, when, all the while, the most vulnerable people in our society suffer.

It is clear that we are dealing with a situation in which there is complete over-reliance on fossil fuels to meet our ever-growing energy needs, and that reliance is particularly focused on oil in many rural areas. As we are all well aware, there is no regulation in the oil industry locally. People need oil, so they have to pay the going rate. Many people are prepared to shop around, but there is often such a minimal difference in the price between competing firms that it makes little or no difference who your supplier is.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment often talks about the benefits of competition in the electricity market, but the simple fact of the matter is that when the choice is between two extortionate suppliers,

it is not much benefit to consumers or small businesses. At a recent Enterprise Committee meeting, the Utility Regulator informed us that Power NI has plans to add a further 12% to our electricity bills to fund a further £1.4 billion infrastructural investment.

What they failed to tell us was that there was also provision in those plans to plug a £50 million hole in the company's pension deficit. It is a ridiculous proposal, and the Minister and the regulator need to ensure that such plans are rejected in their current form. Consumers cannot afford yet another hike in electricity prices.

The current consultation on the renewable heat incentive by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) is a major disappointment. A sum of £25 million was awarded to the Executive by the British Government to enable us to generate more of our heat energy from renewable sources. However, the Department will not allow any of that money to be used in areas where there is an existing gas network. I cannot see the logic of such a move, and I would appreciate some clarification from the Minister on the reasons behind that. The determination by the Department to protect the existing gas industry is a major problem, and I would like to see it addressed. In the Assembly and the Executive, it is well rehearsed that the Minister for Social Development takes the lead on fuel poverty. However, given its responsibility for energy policy, much more could and should be done by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to deliver real change for the people whom we represent.

I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the excellent work that the Consumer Council does as an advocate for consumers and in providing a voice for people. I also recognise and congratulate groups such as the Fuel Poverty Coalition and Age NI for their efforts to eradicate fuel poverty from our society, particularly for our most vulnerable people.

The most recent figures reveal that it costs on average £1,085 more to heat a home with oil than it does with gas. That has a much greater impact on those who live in rural areas. The planned expansion of the gas network is to be welcomed. It will be beneficial to many people, but it will not help those who live in many parts of my constituency. It will not solve any of our problems if we simply continue to monitor global

fuel prices and use excuses such as an ongoing war in the Middle East or a tsunami in Japan to prevent measures being put in place to help to alleviate this growing problem.

Across our society there are many who are very passionate about tackling fuel poverty. Many of those people are active in my own constituency, and they work on a voluntary basis to try to come up with solutions to a very difficult problem.

I also want to bring to the Minister's attention the ongoing concern among many in County Fermanagh about her decision to award an exploratory licence to Tamboran to use a process known as fracking in 750 sq km of the county, much of which is an area of special scientific interest. As the Minister is well aware, there may be tens of trillions of cubic feet of shale gas underneath Fermanagh. However, what concerns people is the method that the companies will use to extract it, injecting some 600 different types of chemicals into the ground with the potential for devastating consequences for the entire county. In previous responses that the Minister has given to me about fracking, it is clear where she stands on the issue. However, I would like some clarification from the Minister on how places like Fermanagh will benefit as regards energy security, given that there is no natural gas network in the county.

Ever-rising energy prices coupled with reductions in take-home pay, job losses, redundancies, benefit cuts and cuts to winter fuel payments mean that action must be taken to address this issue. Unlike the rest of Ireland or Britain, energy suppliers here do not provide cheaper tariffs for those most in need. Although the cost of all forms of energy here greatly exceeds those in the rest of these islands, our household incomes are much lower.

Those are many of the reasons why much more work needs to be done by the Assembly, the Executive, the Minister and the Utility Regulator to try to tackle growing energy prices. I look forward to hearing the debate that follows.

Mr Moutray: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out "and the large energy companies".

The rise in energy prices is on everyone's mind as we approach what we are told will be a similar winter to last year — if not a worse winter — weather-wise, and as the financial pain caused by the economic downturn continues for many

consumers. The words "fuel poverty," "energy price rise" or "price hike" are all too common, and it is time that all Departments, not just DETI, work together for those constituents who are struggling with this huge burden.

The debate is timely, particularly in the aftermath of numerous price rises. We have only to think back over the past month and the announcement by Firmus Energy of its price increase in the 10 towns in which it operates. On 25 August, we also learned that Power NI is increasing electricity prices by 18.6% from 1 October, with consumers seeing the increase in their January 2012 bills.

4.00 pm

Additionally, we have witnessed an increase in the price of coal, which is a blow to consumers who use only coal to heat their home or coal fires as a means of complementing central heating systems. People are concerned about the affordability of energy and about where the money will come from if prices continue to rise. Indeed, I believe that the recent hikes in prices are a blow that could result in an increase in deaths, sickness, failing health and reduced educational success. That is because people will just not have enough money to fuel and heat their home, travel the required distance to work or, for young people, travel to places of education.

The price increases afflict the most vulnerable groups in society, such as pensioners and single parents. Around half the people who are in fuel poverty are aged 60 and over, and 40% of households in fuel poverty have children. It is well documented that erratic energy costs and low incomes are major contributing factors to this situation. It is notable that in the area covered by Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon district councils, much of which lies in my constituency, the percentage of homes suffering fuel poverty reached 46.3% in 2009, which is the fourth highest figure in Northern Ireland. As the economic situation has worsened, I am sure that that figure has increased significantly. Furthermore, small businesses are struggling for survival. The Federation of Small Businesses notes that a rise in fuel duty is stifling eight out of 10 small firms, and it is particularly concerned for the manufacturing, construction and transport industries.

Those statistics are alarming, to say the least. I, for one, want to see the energy companies,

however large or small, have fair and affordable pricing for all. My party's amendment is best placed to ensure that, because, unfortunately, Minister Foster does not have the powers to deal directly with private energy companies or to assist in setting the prices that they charge. Her role in the process is to negotiate with the Utility Regulator to ensure that its scrutiny of energy providers is to a high and transparent standard.

I commend the Minister for her efforts to negotiate and curtail energy prices, for her ongoing discussions with the Utility Regulator and for bringing forward the strategic framework as published in 2010. That new strategic energy framework gives a firm signal of commitment. It is aimed at ensuring future access to secure, competitively priced and sustainable energy for all in Northern Ireland. It lays out the Department's commitment to deliver an energy policy for Northern Ireland that will support a prosperous and sustainable future for all consumers, and it seeks to maximise the economic opportunities and benefit for Northern Ireland. It recognises that the opportunities from energy policy issues are pivotal to future economic growth in Northern Ireland and that the Department and Invest NI will work closely with the business community to ensure that we, as an Assembly, are well placed to meet the energy challenges ahead.

As stated, the Minister does not have a direct role in setting electricity and natural gas tariffs. However, I commend her and her officials for working closely with the Utility Regulator and the energy industry to establish, where possible, measures to put downward pressure on prices. Those measures include having gas supply competition in the greater Belfast area and in the electricity supply market across Northern Ireland. Since its creation in 2007, the single electricity market has provided greater transparency and increased the number of suppliers, thereby improving competition. Additionally, we have seen the mutualisation of energy assets, such as the Scotland to Northern Ireland gas pipeline, the Moyle electricity interconnector and the Belfast gas transmission pipeline. The Minister's commitment to renewable energy is also notable, as is the fact that the strategic framework sets a target of 40%, which, in the longer term, should provide greater price stability for energy consumers.

It is time that the Assembly worked together to address this escalating problem, which does not lie solely at the feet of the Enterprise, Trade

and Investment Minister. Indeed, we need a joined-up approach. We require additional schemes, such as the warm homes scheme, the boiler scrappage scheme and the NIHE heating scheme, which Minister McCausland has been proactively progressing. We also need all our Departments to use the government estate's huge energy purchasing power to negotiate lower prices for consumers and for the home heating oil industry to do more to support vulnerable households and those in fuel poverty. The amendment more accurately reflects the Minister's responsibilities in that regard. I thank the proposer of the substantive motion for not dividing the House and accepting the amendment.

Mr Nesbitt: I will address the first half of the motion, which asks us to recognise the financial pressures on families and businesses, and I do. At the beginning of the previous Assembly, 36% of families were in fuel poverty, and, at the beginning of this Assembly, that percentage had risen to 44%. That figure has since gone up further because of the price rises that Mr Moutray and others mentioned. I will not labour the point because I believe that my colleague Mr Copeland will return to that issue later in the debate.

As for small businesses, it seems to me that energy prices are part of a poisonous cocktail that is choking the ambition of the House and the Executive to put the economy at the heart of our Programme for Government. I do not ask you to take my word for it, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will quote from a representative of the Federation of Small Businesses, who recently said:

"The local economy is already facing a barrage of obstacles with increasing unemployment, dwindling private sector action and the highest energy costs in the United Kingdom."

He went on to say:

"costs are only serving to further compound and complicate this already undesirable situation."

The FSB knows that its members need electricity more than any other source of energy. Indeed, in its survey, the next source, at 43% of users, was oil. That could lead us to ask once again why we are going for a 40% target by 2020 for renewable energy. Desirable as that might be on paper, in practice the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment was told recently that to get from 0% to 20% would cost some £80

million, but to get from 20% to 40% would cost a further £800 million. That cost will be borne by families and small businesses. As Mr Flanagan said, renewing our infrastructure and investing in renewables has been estimated as costing a further rise of up to 12.5% in electricity prices next year. Although, to be fair to the regulator, I must say that he has not yet determined whether he will allow any of the proposed rises, never mind the full 12.5%.

The second half of the motion calls on the Minister to liaise with the regulator. I must ask why we would want the Minister to do that. When we examine the Utility Regulator's objectives, we see that the first is to protect the short- and long-term interests of electricity, gas, water and sewerage customers with regard to price and quality of service. If the Minister needs to speak to the regulator, can we assume that either the regulator is not doing his job or that the job does not work properly? For an answer to that question, perhaps we should look at the regulator's third objective, which is to promote competition, where appropriate, in the generation, transmission and supply of electricity.

That brings me to a question that I have been asking publicly and privately: is the consumer any better off 20 years after privatisation? In public, the best answer that I have received is that the consumer is better off because we have better security of supply, but I wonder whether that is exclusively down to privatisation or whether the renewal and upkeep of the grid and the introduction of new technologies would have achieved that objective anyway. When I have asked the question privately, sometimes the answer is greeted by a nervous laugh and the expression, "That is a good question". I draw my own inferences from that. As Mr Moutray said, the Minister has no direct role in setting tariffs, so, although we have introduced competition and choice, I question what choice we have introduced. For gas users, that means choosing between a company that wants to increase its prices by 35% and its rival, which wants to increase its prices by 39%. Is that good for the consumer? Again, I draw my own inferences.

We have a regulator who has an operating budget of £7 million. However, what does the regulator do that the energy division of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment could not do? If the Minister is to liaise —

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

Mr Nesbitt: — perhaps she should liaise with her Government colleagues to make sure that energy becomes part of an economic enterprise zone that will drive the economy and is put at the heart of the next Programme for Government.

Dr McDonnell: I support the motion. Other Members who spoke highlighted the severe problem of fuel poverty, and I endorse their comments. A recent Citizens Advice Bureau survey found that one in three of its elderly clients was living in fuel poverty. It is widely thought that the problem could affect even more people, and the previous Member who spoke highlighted some of the facts around that. As many as half the households in Northern Ireland could be living in fuel poverty. Indeed, I noted a recent survey that suggested that the percentage of people in fuel poverty could be as high as 80% in some pockets of deprivation. That is frightening. As that is happening, energy prices, be it for electricity, home heating oil or gas — with a 40% price hike from Phoenix Natural Gas and a 35% price hike from Firmus Energy for its Belfast customers — continue to spiral. The problem can only escalate.

As I said, I welcome the motion, but it is important to note that it focuses on only one factor that leads and contributes to fuel poverty: pricing. Alongside high energy prices, the climate, lower household incomes and poor energy efficiency are all contributing factors. If we are serious about tackling fuel poverty, we must be mindful of all those factors and take all necessary cross-departmental action to address them.

I was heartened yesterday when I heard reports that the Minister for Social Development was to engage with colleagues in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to look at ways of tackling fuel poverty. For me, the time for talking is over. We need action as we approach another potentially bitterly cold winter. I have voiced concerns about the mechanism employed to set energy prices. There is a distinct lack of consumer confidence over whether energy prices are set in a fair, open and transparent way, so steps must be taken to address that. The Utility Regulator is doing a good job, but it is a difficult job. Fuel poverty is escalating to a point at which more

action is needed from fuel companies, as well as from energy officials in setting energy policy.

Certain inroads have been made in the renewable energy sector, but we are nowhere near where we could be or need to be. I know that it is probably expensive to push beyond the 20% level, but we must develop a new sustainable energy model that puts the needs of local consumers, rather than those of producers, first. We need an energy model with the lowest economic and environmental cost for our people. Getting that model and policy will involve close liaison between the Minister, the regulator and, if possible, the large companies on pricing. However, it has to be much wider than that. It requires identifying the action necessary for the creation of a stable energy framework and the greater promotion of energy efficiency and small-scale renewable energy businesses. That, in turn, will involve examining further the potential of and benefits from greater strategic energy policy between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic in lowering energy costs on the island. It will involve identifying the action necessary to realise our indigenous renewable potential. That cannot and will not happen if it is left solely to market forces. Realising the indigenous renewable potential and removing barriers to its development are key weapons in the fight against rising and crippling fuel prices. Other Members pointed out that we cannot continue to rely on importing so much of our energy. It is not safe or sustainable. It is not in the best interests of all people. There is absolutely no good reason why production of electricity from wind, sun, sea and organic sources, at an efficient and affordable price, should not increase significantly.

4.15 pm

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

Dr McDonnell: An abundance of indigenous renewable resources is waiting to be tapped into here. The Executive must create the necessary climate for confidence in local businesses to grow the renewables industry.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Lo: Since the dramatic price increases in 2008, many families and businesses have struggled to pay their fuel bills. With recent energy price rises, they will face an even more difficult task to pay for heating and electricity.

The fact that price increases affect nearly all forms of energy, such as gas, oil, coal and electricity, shows the immediate need for action to be taken.

It is imperative that the Minister makes every effort to work with the Utility Regulator and the energy industry to ensure that consumers get a fair deal. I understand that the Minister has no power to determine prices for the private sector. Surely, it is not unreasonable to expect large companies to have a conscience and the social responsibility to refrain from making huge profits out of people's misery. Therefore, my party supports the motion but not the amendment.

It is shameful that many elderly citizens have faced the decision between heating and eating because they simply cannot afford both. With another winter due that is predicted to be as cold as last year's, we must ensure that no person faces that dilemma. It is not just the elderly who experience problems in paying for their heating. As has been highlighted by previous Members to speak in the debate, various recent estimates are that almost half of households are in fuel poverty.

Actions in the short term and long term are needed to tackle that issue. In the short term, the Assembly should continue to offer the winter fuel payment. That should help the elderly, who suffer most from fuel poverty. For elderly people, the consequences of not being able to heat their home could be preventable health problems — unnecessary expenditure for the NHS — and, in some cases, even death. However, the winter fuel payment alone will not solve the problem. A Citizens Advice Bureau report stated that, of the 500,000 households that use oil, around 400,000 use an inefficient boiler. The Assembly needs to ensure that there is higher energy efficiency in the public sector, improve home insulation and use efficient heating systems to become more effective in the use of energy and help cut energy costs. It would have the added bonus of providing employment in the hard-pressed construction industry.

Unfortunately, these short-term methods are just sticking plasters. A long-term goal is needed that will improve our fuel independence and security. We actually import 99% of our primary energy fuel needs. That figure is completely unsustainable, which is why we must take renewable energy seriously. I know that it would

not make any large-scale difference in the short term. However, in the long term, it could ensure price stability. Although we would have to invest, it would be worth it in the end. Look at Scotland, which leads the way in this field after it designated most of its coastal waters as a renewable energy enterprise zone. We could do the same and reap the benefits from creating jobs, attracting foreign investment and helping to reduce prices.

Mr Dunne: I support the amendment. This is a very important issue that affects every section of society in Northern Ireland.

Rising energy prices have become an all-too-common feature on our television screens and in our newspapers. We all have constituents who are in regular contact to tell us of their daily battle to afford to heat their home and pay their bills. Unfortunately, rising energy prices are increasingly becoming an issue, one that we must all try to address.

We all recognise the severe financial pressure on families and small businesses due to the recent energy price increases. The most recent announcement from Power NI about its intention to increase the cost of electricity by 18.6% from 1 October will put a particular burden on householders. The timing of that announcement, as we approach the winter months, is very regrettable.

Businesses also suffer in several ways from energy price increases, because hard-working families do not have the extra cash to support their local businesses. Local businesses increasingly cite rising energy prices as a barrier to competitiveness, and it is yet another barrier they face as they battle to keep their doors open in today's tough economic conditions. It is regrettable that Power NI's 55,000 business customers will also be subject to this latest price increase.

The Utility Regulator has an important role to play in trying to protect consumers as much as possible from ever-increasing energy costs. The forecast figures that were recently presented to the ETI Committee indicated that NIE's price control submission for the next five years may see major increases. The Utility Regulator admitted that there has to be significant investment in upgrading the grid to replace old and substandard sections and provide connection to it for the increased renewable generation that is required to meet the target of having 40% of

our electricity consumption from renewables by 2020. Such demands for major capital investment must be fully justified, as it would be wrong to pass on such costs directly to consumers, both commercial and domestic. It is imperative that the Utility Regulator does its job effectively and tries to minimise the impact on consumers.

One of the most effective policies to reduce the impact of rising energy prices is to encourage and exploit more practical efficiency measures, which can help to ease the burden on those who are struggling to survive. Power NI's recently launched free cavity wall insulation scheme for households with lower incomes is an excellent measure, and we would like to see more like it. Energy efficiency is something that we can all play a part in as we try to reduce the amount of energy consumed and, in turn, try to lower utility bills. The DSD's warm homes and boiler replacement schemes are other examples of worthwhile, realistic and practical measures.

Competition is another area that can help to keep down household bills. That is an area that my colleague Minister Arlene Foster is keen to promote and develop. I am aware of ongoing work designed to attract greater competition across the realm of energy, which is to be welcomed. I trust that we will begin to see new and greater competition in the energy sector in the near future. The more that other companies come in, the more competitive prices will become.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member mentioned the key importance of competition. Does he agree that one of the problems is that we have firms in Northern Ireland that do not cover all of Northern Ireland? In some parts of Northern Ireland, such as the Ards peninsula, there is a restriction on the number of firms that operate. Some firms have not yet expanded into those areas, but the more we can get firms that are based in Northern Ireland to cover all of Northern Ireland, the more there can be direct competition, which would hopefully act as a driver towards reducing prices.

Mr Dunne: I support the gas pipeline being extended down the Ards peninsula.

Renewable energy can play a part in easing the financial pressure on energy consumers. I know of constituents who introduced forms of renewable energy generation and have benefited from being able to generate energy

from measures such as wind turbines. However, renewable energy can be an expensive measure, particularly in the short term.

Energy prices and fuel poverty are interconnected, and I know that there is ongoing work involving the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister for Social Development. I welcome that co-operation. A joined-up approach is the only way in which we can try to minimise the impact of this worldwide problem for energy consumers in Northern Ireland.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak, and I welcome the Minister being here to listen. It has been an interesting, mature debate thus far — until I spoke. I had to say that before somebody else did. I apologise to the Minister, as I may have to leave before the end of the debate, but I will make a point of reading Hansard tomorrow.

Our motion recognises the fact that people are in severe financial difficulty, and some will be faced with severe financial difficulty coming into the winter months, depending on the weather forecast. We are supposed to have a heatwave this week and then snow over the next couple of weeks. We should turn the energy off in here and save a bit of money.

We are all consumers and are all faced with having to access energy, whether it is gas, electricity or oil. So it affects Members as much as the people we represent. However, I am a bit confused. On the one hand, we are told that prices have to increase because of international developments and world events and that it is the world economic crisis. On the other hand, we are told that floods, earthquakes, tsunamis and wars are the main reasons for the increases in energy prices. In April, the Utility Regulator said:

“rising international wholesale fuel costs are the reason for the 39.1% increase in gas prices”.

He linked the increase with international developments, and it is good for him to give us that information. On 16 June, the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment heard not only from the regulator but from NIE about its plans to increase electricity prices to help to fill a gap in its pension fund. So is it international events, or is it a pension fund? As consumers and people who act as a conduit between this place and what is happening in government and in our communities, we are entitled to find out some

of those details. Our communities are not daft. If the reason is international developments, our people could accept that and know what is going on, but do not come along and tell us that there is an issue with pensions so we need to increase energy prices.

The fuel poverty issue was covered by other Members' contributions, so I do not intend to go into that. Phil Flanagan highlighted some of those issues when he moved the motion, including the impact that energy price increases will have on those faced with fuel poverty and the work that is going on with other Departments. It is important that the Executive look at the matter collectively and take a holistic approach to energy prices.

Mike Nesbitt raised two points about the Federation of Small Businesses. The economy was at the heart of the previous Programme for Government, and, importantly, I think that it will be a big player in this Programme for Government, which we have yet to see. The Federation of Small Businesses stated:

“increasing energy costs are yet another barrier to economic recovery ... so the Regulator has a key role to play in long term energy supply.”

Given that we rely on many small and medium-sized businesses, increased energy prices will affect not only families and communities but economic recovery.

A substantial number of our private companies are small and medium-sized enterprises. When they are saying that, we need to take on board the impact of the situation.

4.30 pm

Mike Nesbitt made another valid point. The reason that the motion calls on the Minister to liaise with the Utility Regulator is that we believe that if the regulator needs more power, we should give him more power. If he needs a nudge in the right direction, there is no one better than Minister Foster to nudge him in the right direction. It is important that the Minister talks to the regulator and that we deal with the extortionate prices being announced rather than just regulating.

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

Ms S Ramsey: The motion is important, and it has been a mature debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Ms S Ramsey: I do not see anyone losing too much energy over it, and I welcome the fact that the House will not divide.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Members who tabled the amendment. I want to address two issues. First, families and businesses face many financial pressures. At a time of economic recession, rising unemployment and cuts in welfare expenditure, many people are finding it increasingly difficult to meet their energy costs. We envisage that those costs will go up and up, which is very serious for us all.

As some Members said, Northern Ireland has the highest levels of fuel poverty in the United Kingdom. Some 44% of all households struggle to heat their homes, and the figure is growing. Rising energy prices continue to make it more difficult and could push more households into the fuel poverty bracket during the bleak winter that is expected. We all remember what last winter was like, and no one wants to go through that again. However, many families, and particularly elderly people, are facing a similar situation this winter.

It costs £1,095 more a year to heat a home with oil than with gas. That is problematic, as Northern Ireland is hugely dependent on oil as a form of energy — 68% of households here use oil. We have higher levels of fuel poverty than is the case in the rest of the United Kingdom. It is estimated that three times as many older people live in fuel poverty in Northern Ireland as in England. Some Members highlighted the fact that there were more than 700 deaths linked to the cold weather last winter. For me, that is more than 700 deaths linked to high energy prices. That is the reality and seriousness of the situation.

Secondly, we need more competition in the Northern Ireland electricity market. I welcome Minister Foster's recent statement on the need for an integrated market strategy, not just between us and the Republic of Ireland but across the British Isles and even with France. We also need to invest in Northern Ireland's infrastructure to improve competitiveness in the energy market and examine opportunities for economies of scale.

I am encouraged that the Minister continues to work with the Utility Regulator and the energy industry to put downward pressure on retail

electricity costs and through initiatives such as the new electricity interconnection for us, Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. We need greater convergence of electricity prices, in line with EU policy as greater market integration occurs. The opportunities for economies of scale are important. I welcome the potential for the green new deal, carbon reduction and renewable technologies.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I refer you to a report that was presented to the Social Development Committee just last week. It was by Eleanor Murphy from the Assembly Research and Information Service and it concerned fuel poverty. It is an excellent report and I recommend it to Members. As far as opportunities are concerned, there is a growing community and voluntary sector that could avail itself of energy brokering. The report gives examples of villages, particularly in rural areas of England, Scotland and Wales, that are setting up oil co-operatives and syndicates that barter with home heating oil companies. Some groups provide support and advice as local not-for-profit energy organisations. A minimum order of 500 litres per household is usually required. Some groups have teamed up with local credit unions that offer one-to-one advice on loans or savings arrangements.

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

Mr Douglas: The average saving is said to be around 10%. Tomorrow, we will have a debate on the community and voluntary sector. Perhaps that is another area that we need to look at as an alternative when we are thinking about reducing costs.

Mr Copeland: I join others in thanking the Members who tabled the motion. I speak in support of the motion as amended. We have all heard much about the frightening escalation in energy prices over the past few days. In the past six weeks, there seems to have been a series of Tyson Fury-like body blows inflicted on those least able to withstand them. The motion talks about recognising the severe financial consequences of the increase of the cost of energy on families and small businesses. However, it does not end there. It is equally important that we remember the elderly, the single dweller and those living in communal situations. Increases in energy prices will affect everyone in society.

High energy prices are one of the primary causes of fuel poverty. As we have heard recently, the other two are low household incomes and poor energy household efficiencies. Households in Northern Ireland are exposed to increases in energy prices. More than 70% of households here heat their homes using oil. Even now, people living in Northern Ireland are paying substantially more than those in the rest of the United Kingdom. We pay £25.70 a week, compared with £20.40 in Wales, £20 in Scotland and £18.70 in England. That differential, as we all know, is taxed. So, not only do we pay more, but we pay more tax.

There is a multitude of hurdles at every turn. The number of people in Northern Ireland who are out of work has soared to 64,000. For those fortunate to have a job, they have one that is without any sense of complete job security.

Of course, it is important that winter is taken into consideration when we look at the planned increases that are due to come into effect. Winter is the very time when people are least able to cope with the increases. There is the added expense of Christmas, which will not be merry for some, and the new year, which will not be prosperous for some, coupled with the cold weather. During the winter, some people have a stark option: they can heat their home, or freeze. What will they do if there is a repeat of last year's winter conditions? Will we let them stay home and struggle? Will we let the number of winter deaths exceed 1,000? This is not conjecture: it is a prediction, based on fact, of what lies in front of us.

The natural gas market in Northern Ireland is largely a Belfast gas market. There are 110,000 consumers supplied by Phoenix and Firmus. I fear that their best selling points are no longer that they deliver the best value for money, but that they provide gas slightly cheaper than the cost of alternatives.

Serious questions must be asked of the Utility Regulator. The office states that its central vision is to:

"make a difference for consumers by listening, innovating and leading."

Well, it is about time that it did what it preaches. Consumers are being hit hard at every turn, and I, therefore, support the motion as amended.

An interesting figure that was uncovered recently perhaps gives some clue to a possible avenue for exploration. In the past four years, the growth in revenue derived from fuel duties in Great Britain has risen by 5.6%; in Northern Ireland, it has risen by 18.2%. The truth is that, today, when all is said and done, we face a real danger that people will die because of what we in the Chamber might elect not to do. Personally, I consider that a matter of some shame.

Mr Brady (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I rise to inform the House of the information that the Committee received on the recent increase in energy prices here, leading to severe financial pressure on vulnerable families. The Committee heard the concerns of a joint delegation from the Fuel Poverty Coalition and National Energy Action on fuel poverty, and it received several papers on the subject from the Consumer Council after its meeting with the Chairperson. A key question is that of what steps the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) have taken and will take to reduce the impact on vulnerable families of the high cost of, and dependence on, home heating oil here. Some 68% of homes use home heating oil, and that figure rises to 82% in rural areas.

In the medium term, at least, prices are likely to continue rising, as oil prices are projected to remain high or increase as world demand recovers. As oil prices here respond to fluctuating wholesale prices set internationally outside the control of government, many question the benefits of regulation of the sector. I understand that DETI works closely with the Utility Regulator and the energy industry to establish, where possible, measures to put downward pressure on prices. The Committee encourages such work and the ongoing investigation by the Office of Fair Trading of anti-competitive agreements in the energy sector. Other measures, such as voluntary energy service agreements to develop voluntary codes of conduct with the oil industry or representative trade bodies must also be encouraged.

The Committee considers that additional measures must be explored and put in place by all relevant Departments to address the worsening fuel poverty situation as we enter the cold winter months. Measures brought to the Committee's attention to date include energy

brokering schemes under a preferred supplier arrangement, bulk aggregated energy buying through groups or co-operatives, and social tariffs and energy rebate schemes. Belfast City Council is one of several already to have piloted a fuel stamps scheme. Finally, Departments could link their energy purchasing to leveraging a better deal for suitable domestic consumers. The Committee is anxious to ensure that all possible measures are taken across Departments to address the important issue of fuel poverty.

Speaking as a Sinn Féin representative, I ask the Minister to give her views on some of the energy brokering schemes mentioned. As Members around the House have said, 756 elderly people died here last winter from cold-related illnesses. That should always be at the top of our agenda. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Byrne: I support the motion and the amendment. Today's debate is timely, and I remember the same sort of debate taking place 12 years ago. The question now is whether the Assembly can have any impact on energy costs. Energy prices are largely determined by the private sector. We have a problem in Northern Ireland. When NIE was privatised 20 years ago, contracts were drawn up with the four generating companies. We were told then that lucrative contracts had to be enacted to protect the excess capacity of Ballylumford power station and others. Now that we are 20 years into those contracts, will the Department revisit them? It was government officials, primarily, who determined the parameters and contents of those contracts. I believe that the Northern Ireland consumer has been ripped off by privatisation. We now have a semblance of competition, but let us not forget that we have the generator companies, the grid owned by another company and two electricity suppliers. However, we have an inbuilt monopoly that was largely determined by those contracts.

In the past, Ministers here have baulked at revisiting the contracts and changing them in the interests of the consumer. I ask the Minister, Mrs Foster, to be brave enough to face up to the fact that generator companies have indulged in what is a greatly expensive luxury for the rest of us. Enormous dividends have been paid every year for 20 years at the expense of the consumer.

4.45 pm

Secondly, there is the role of the regulator. I am not so sure that the regulator is operating in the best interests of the consumer. Mr Copeland, Mr Nesbitt and others have mentioned it. I agree that there is something wrong with the way that the regulator's office works. Is the regulator handicapped by legislation? Is that the problem? Does the regulator not have a free hand to determine in the interests of the consumer? We are told that the regulator's main public responsibility is to act in the interests of the consumer. If he is not acting in the interests of the consumer — that is the general perception — the question is whether he is handicapped by the legislation. If that is the problem, the Assembly and DETI need to face up to that responsibility and change it. That is where the challenge lies.

People who live in the western parts of Northern Ireland and drive 20,000 miles a year pay an extra £1,200 a year in taxation compared with people who may live in the greater Belfast area and drive only 8,000 miles a year. That is a handicap for small businesses and people living in western areas who have to use car transport.

Anybody who knows anything about the Northern Ireland road haulage industry knows that it is being decimated. The price of diesel, at £6.30 a gallon, is killing what was a very viable industry in Northern Ireland for many years. Talk to the people in Montgomery Transport, McCullough Transport or any other transport company, and they will tell you how difficult it is to keep roadworthy vehicles on the road. We used to have an extensive road haulage industry in Northern Ireland; it has been decimated. What is worse is that the industry is being undercut by other companies, and we have reached the stage where the Northern Ireland haulage industry is so small that we will pay the price of higher charges later.

I support the motion, but I call on the Minister to visit the Assembly's responsibility in tackling the parameters of the regulator and the residual contracts that were given out so generously in the interests of the shareholders of the then-privatised NIE.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Peter Weir, who will have three minutes.

Mr Weir: You offer a fresh challenge, Mr Deputy Speaker. As time is short, I will keep my remarks

relatively brief. I welcome this opportunity and congratulate the proposers of the motion in tabling it. As other Members indicated, it is timely, because we are on the approach to winter. The matter is vital, as announcements of energy price rises have recently been made and we face a potentially severe winter ahead. My party tabled a small amendment, because the original wording of the motion took it slightly outside the Minister's remit. I thank all those who have embraced the motion. I believe that, although the House has made a range of diverse points in the debate, there has been an emerging consensus as to the seriousness of the issue. I think that there is a unity of purpose across the Chamber in relation to the motion.

My colleague Sammy Douglas stated that there had been 700 deaths as a result of cold weather in Northern Ireland. We often talk of things being a matter of life and death; this is clearly such a matter. Michael Copeland indicated that those deaths are unnecessary, and the fear is that we could be looking at an even higher death toll as energy prices increase this winter. This is vital, whether it affects families or the elderly, in particular, who are most vulnerable to cold.

I was shocked by a recent presentation by the Housing Executive in my council area about the sheer extent of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. Even in the supposedly affluent area of north Down, the rate has been put at about 40%. In some parts of the Province, such as Strabane, it potentially has to re-examine its fuel policy to try to cope with the situation. That shows the seriousness of the matter.

I take a slight exception to what the Member who previously spoke said. There are many of us in the east of the Province who will be driving considerably more than 8,000 miles, and, indeed, a lot of businesses will be faced with that. Across Northern Ireland there is a crippling debt and weight of finance caused by high energy prices. That heavily plays into our industry and competitiveness, so it is vital that things are done.

A number of things have been raised in the debate that we could look at. We could look at trying to ensure that there is a higher level of competitiveness, which should hopefully act as a driver down. There have been indications from the Social Development Committee, Mickey Brady and Sammy Douglas that energy brokering

is something that we need to look at. There are a lot of things that lie outside of our control. To a certain extent, some of the world factors will affect energy prices, and we cannot simply pretend that they do not exist. However, more pressure can be brought to bear on the energy companies, via the correct route of the Utility Regulator. I look forward to the remainder of the debate.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I welcome the debate and the opportunity to respond to the motion. There are no doubts in the House or outside it that the recent increases in energy prices present a real challenge to homes and businesses across Northern Ireland. Although we have mostly looked at homes here this afternoon, it is right that we should remember that a lot of small businesses have seen their overheads increase radically in the past month.

The challenge is more pressing in the current economic climate, when families and businesses are already facing real difficulties in making ends meet. As economy Minister, I know the unemployment statistics only too well. Of those in work, many have seen their wages frozen, and I recognise that energy prices are a real issue for those on low incomes. Any increase in energy costs at this time is therefore disappointing and hugely unwelcome.

Although I have a long speech on policy that I could go through this afternoon, it would be more beneficial if I answered some of the queries that were raised during the debate. I will go through the various Members and the issues that they raised.

Mr Flanagan seems to think that I do not know very much about County Fermanagh, but I would like to tell him that I know quite a bit about it. He set his cards firmly on the table at the start of the debate by saying that there was a lot of profiteering and greed in the energy companies. We saw how the nationalisation or privatisation debate took place in the 1980s. Indeed, Mr Nesbitt made various points about that in August; he continues to make those points about whether it was right to move to privatisation at that time. It is rather strange, I have to say, coming from a man who stood for the Conservative and Unionist Party at the last election. However, the point that he wants to make is that he is not convinced by the privatisation argument.

Mr Flanagan mentioned the payments that are made to company executives. He mentioned a number of executives in AES. He also mentioned Firmus, but I am not sure whether he meant Firmus or Phoenix, because I think that it was a Phoenix director rather than a Firmus director who was in the news most. Such payments are largely a matter for the private companies; they will include them in their annual reports, and then we can judge them by their competition. The firms are privatised now, and we have to realise that that is where we are.

The regulator was set up as independent of government to provide the function of regulating those companies. There have been a lot of comments about whether the regulator has enough power. He has statutory powers of course. Some people believe that the regulator sits under DETI's remit, but of course he does not. He has nothing to do with DETI; he is a non-ministerial government department on his own. He is independent, and, if you check your Budget debates, you will see that he gets his finance from the Department of Finance and Personnel separately. Therefore, although I will of course continue to meet and debate with the regulator about all the issues related to energy policy, he is his own man and has been during my time in office. He will tell us that on occasion, and I have been told that on occasion too.

Mr Flanagan said that there was a great over-reliance on fossil fuels, and he took exception to the fact that there is no regulation of the oil industry in Northern Ireland. He probably well knows that heating oil is not regulated in Great Britain or in Northern Ireland because a significant number of suppliers are operating in a competitive supply market. Independent figures show that local customers have been able to buy their oil more cheaply than consumers in Great Britain and, indeed, in the Republic of Ireland. Notwithstanding that, I accept that we have an over-reliance on heating oil in Northern Ireland, particularly in the west of the country.

I welcome the ongoing investigation of the Office of Fair Trading (OFT), which was mentioned by Mickey Brady. The OFT is conducting a market study of the supply of energy to consumers not connected to the main gas grid across the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland. I look forward to the conclusions of that study, which will come to us next month and will feed into our proposals to bring gas to other areas, which Members know about.

That is out for consultation at the moment and the consultation period closes at the end of September. I make no apology for the fact that I want to bring gas to the west. I want a gas network in the west of the Province, and I believe in the consultation that we have issued on that. I hope that we can find a way to bring gas to the west so that we can introduce more competition among companies in the west.

I know that the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment was briefed by the Utility Regulator on possible future price rises. Much was made of the figure of 12.5% that has been mentioned. Mr Nesbitt recognised that that increase will occur only if everything that Power NI asks for is given to it. Indeed, it does not take into account the efficiencies that would occur if we were to have the new North/South interconnector in place. We all know that the absence of the interconnector is costing us in the region of £18 million a year. Although I listened to the Sinn Féin Members, I did not hear anything about the North/South interconnector, which was disappointing. That is the sort of infrastructure that we need to have in place to help bring efficiencies into the energy market in Northern Ireland. All those issues are addressed in the strategic energy framework. We have to deal with a lot of competing interests. That is something that I want to come back to in response to Dr McDonnell, who raised some very interesting issues to do with our choices for energy policy moving forward.

Mention was also made of the £50 million NIE pension deficit. Ms Ramsey said that, although we are told that energy prices is a global issue, she did not believe that it was totally global and that it was more to do with the pension deficit that is still hanging around as a legacy of what happened in the 1980s. The pension deficit relates to the NIE networks business. Power NI, as Mr Byrne rightly pointed out, is a separate entity, and although network and other costs are passed to customers, the higher Power NI tariffs have been driven by increases in wholesale fuel costs.

The Utility Regulator expects NIE to manage its pension costs within the allowance provided for it in the current price control, and has made no decision about whether, in light of the forthcoming price control fifth five-year regulatory period (RP5), he will permit any allowance in respect of the pension deficit. It would be wrong to say that the huge increases that we have seen are

wholly because of a pension deficit that remains as a legacy issue. Some of the increases may be passed through in transmission costs, but we have to remember that there are different parts of the energy infrastructure and we must realise that the increases have been managed through the current price control.

Mr Flanagan said that he wished that I would put more emphasis on fuel poverty. It has been well rehearsed in the Chamber today that DSD leads on that issue.

However, we obviously work very closely with DSD on all its fuel poverty initiatives. Indeed, Minister McCausland and I hope to make some announcements in the next couple of weeks in connection with some ways in which we can help to mitigate price rises and help those who are in most need.

5.00 pm

I come to the House where I am told that something must be done about the issues that face us, that we must find new ways of dealing with some matters and that we must bring about all those things. Then, when somebody asks for an exploration licence to look into fracking, that is obviously wrong, because there must be no exploration anywhere in Northern Ireland. I have to say that the amount of scaremongering that has gone on about fracking is quite shameful, because we need to find new ways of delivering efficiencies in our energy policy. There will be gas infrastructure in the west to link the system up, because, if there were shale gas in County Fermanagh, that infrastructure may come more quickly than I hope. Before anything more can happen on the ground with fracking and the whole issue of deep exploration, a number of permits are needed. The company has to come back to DETI, and it has to go to the Planning Service, the Environment Agency and the Health and Safety Executive. Therefore, to say that fracking will occur in Fermanagh is not just premature, it is downright scaremongering. It is shameful that a Fermanagh man should not be looking for job opportunities for his county in a way that may come about.

Stephen Moutray proposed the amendment and pointed out that there were many Departments that should help to tackle the whole issue of rising energy costs. I am pleased to tell him that that matter was raised by the First Minister and deputy First Minister at the first Executive meeting after we came back from the summer

break. They hope to meet the regulator in the near future, and I also hope to attend that meeting. It is about joined-up government and about everybody playing their part and dealing with all those issues.

As well as talking about nationalisation and privatisation, Mr Nesbitt said that the competition did not really seem to be working. Airtricity came into the market only last year, and it is providing an alternative. What I find quite amazing is how few people are moving to take advantage of the difference between the two providers. People in Northern Ireland are very conservative by nature, which has been shown by the fact that not very many people are moving in that regard.

Mr McDonnell mentioned poor energy efficiency. I think that that is a critical point, because we can talk about energy costs and what causes them and all that sort of thing. However, what are we going to do to mitigate those energy costs? That is where energy efficiency really becomes very important. I encourage any consumers who have concerns about their energy bills to make use of the range of advice and support that is available to them. The Department for Social Development's warm homes scheme offers insulation and heating measures to households on qualifying benefits, and energy suppliers can offer advice to their customers about saving energy and payment options.

Mr McDonnell told me that we need action and that we need to be transparent and open, and he will know that we have asked the regulator to do that. Indeed, he said that when talking about the increases that large business owners faced last year.

One of the difficulties with energy policy and its working out is that we have so many choices to make. The House tells me that it wants more renewables, sustainability and security of supply but that it wants it all done at a lower cost. It wants more competition and more infrastructure. We will have to make choices, and the House has to grow up about the choices that are made. We cannot have our cake and eat it. We have to make choices about energy policy. Whether that is looking at the consumers of today versus the consumers of tomorrow, we are going to have to make those choices. All those issues have to be dealt with. We particularly need to look at a place that is

wider than Northern Ireland, which is a point that Mr McDonnell made.

The European Union has an objective of having a wider wholesale electricity and gas market by 2020, and it is pushing member states to move in that direction with regulation. We are looking at a regulatory system that includes not only Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland but the entirety of the British Isles and France so that we will have a cross-border mandatory pool of energy. That will bring better competition, and accessing energy from a wider pool than we have been able to access heretofore is the way forward. That will bring great benefit to Northern Ireland, and I am pushing that.

Anna Lo said that Scotland has moved ahead on renewables. I would like to do the same, but it is a matter of choice. The Member will know that, when we come to put up wind farms in certain areas, we face objections —

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

Mrs Foster: We have choices to make in all those areas. I thank all Members who contributed to the debate. I am sorry that I did not get to answer all their questions, but I am happy to write to them if any of them want me to take up those issues.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Members who moved the motion and welcome the opportunity to wind on the amendment. I also thank the Members who have indicated already that they will support the amendment.

It is clear to everyone that growing energy prices are a real problem in this country. Last week, Mr Paul Frew and I tabled a motion on fuel poverty. At that time, we noted that everyone, especially the most vulnerable, are finding it increasingly challenging to pay their fuel bills. As I said during that motion, it is vital that we support our most vulnerable constituents and our local businesses when they are dealing with such unexpected and unprecedented energy prices. However, having listened to the Minister, we have to accept that the wholesale market is a global one. Much as I would like to tell everyone that Northern Ireland is the centre of the universe, outside factors have a knock-on effect on what we experience here. Therefore, despite my genuine concern for the difficulties associated with increasing prices, we cannot forget that those pressures are global and that

we have to work within the confines of a global market.

In addition, we need to be realistic about what the Minister can do about energy prices. Legally, DETI has limited control over large companies, and certain things are outside the Department's control. For that reason, we felt that the words "and large energy companies" should be removed from the motion. Again, I thank the Members who supported that.

Some significant accusations were levelled at the Utility Regulator. I am certainly not here to defend the Utility Regulator. One issue that I would like the Minister to consider is the fact that 61% of the regulator's funding goes on staffing costs. That is in the region of £4.35 million, and that needs to be looked at to ensure value for money and efficiency in the office of the regulator. Calls were made for increased regulation of the market, especially the oil market. However, although I support robust regulation when it makes sense — for example, when there is a market failure — regulation for regulation's sake is not a useful tool. Unnecessary regulation will only put off companies from coming here, and it could run the risk of damaging consumer confidence.

Social tariffs could also negatively affect consumer confidence. Although I wholeheartedly support protecting the most vulnerable from the increases, the question remains of who pays for the introduction of a social tariff. Ultimately, those on the brink of fuel poverty and businesses will have to pay the price, and we could simply end up with more people in fuel poverty as an unintended consequence of that move.

So what can government do to alleviate the impact of the crisis?

There are, of course, several things that we can do in the long term to protect ourselves from energy price increases and to minimise the impact of any future rise in global pricing. Work can be done on renewables, such as improving energy efficiency and extending the gas network, both of which the Minister has discussed. However, it is vital that we balance the cost to the consumer with the security of supply and environmental issues. Renewables will be good for the environment and help security of supply, but they come at a cost to the consumer. However, through these measures, we can regain more stability over long-term fuel

prices as we will be less reliant on a volatile oil market.

The crisis that we are facing is directly due to the increase in global energy prices. As an extremely small country, we are especially challenged by the practical realities of such a struggle in the global market. As discussed, in the future, it is possible that we may be able to develop more internal solutions to deal with our energy needs, such as by means of investing in renewables. However, in the immediate future, as we have all discussed today, a pragmatic approach must be taken to minimise the long-term impact that such a rise in energy prices can have on families and businesses and on the economic situation in Northern Ireland. Therefore, I support the motion and commend the amendment to the House.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I rise to support the motion, and I very much welcome the debate that we have had today, although there is a sense of being resigned to the fact that there are a lot of limitations on what we can do. So, after today's debate, we need to explore the options and come back with solutions as soon as possible, because there are not enough solutions on the table at present.

I went on to the Consumer Council website last night, and it contains a very useful tool to compare the prices of oil and fuel prices across different parts of the North. When looking through its archives from the past two years, you realise the effect of the prices. We can say that gas prices have gone up one third and that electricity prices have gone up 30%, but what does that mean in real terms? For example, the average price for 900 litres of heating oil on 22 September was £533.62. This time last year it was £396.68, and two years ago it was £339.56. So, that is an increase of £200 over two years for a fill of oil. Those are the kinds of figures that households are facing. Of course, as many Members have said, people from rural areas not only pay for oil but for a fill of fuel to go to work in Belfast every day. Some people come from west Tyrone and some come from north Antrim, and the price of fuel has shot through the roof in the past year.

In the past two years, we have been living in a period of the worst winters, certainly in my living memory, and that exacerbates the problems that we face. Of course, indicators from some

sources in Roads Service suggest that this year will be worse again. So, not only will we have problems with our transport system, but that will add to the excess winter deaths that the Deputy Chair of the Social Development Committee referred to earlier. So, people need help and support, and we need to provide some solutions to those problems.

The Deputy Chair of the Social Development Committee, Mickey Brady, referred to a number of proposals that were presented to that Committee, one of which was energy brokering. A feasibility study has been carried out by the Housing Executive, the Consumer Council and Bryson Charitable Group, and it recommended that, by using local and central government procurement bodies to use their energy purchasing power as a base load, we could leverage a better deal for domestic consumers under one contractual tariff arrangement. So, the state, as opposed to a private company, could act as a broker on a cost-neutral, not-for-profit basis. That would increase savings to the consumers further. The report was based on the success of a Dutch initiative called Met de Stroom Mee, which sought the registration of 10,000 households that agreed to let it negotiate on their behalf directly with the energy companies. That is one alternative that we should look at.

5.15 pm

Phil Flanagan opened the debate and made the important point that we should try to ensure that the House is undivided on this issue. I am glad that that is the case and that we have had a constructive debate. He referred to the fact that the chief executives of some energy companies are paid exorbitant salaries: £700,000, in one example. It is absolutely ridiculous that anybody earns that sort of money, given the pressures that ordinary people face and the fact that the worst off in society are in their worst position in some time.

He also raised the issue of Power NI proposals to plug the gap in pension shortages and the rural impact of energy prices, because oil is more expensive than gas, and, as Mickey Brady also said, 82% of homes use oil. That needs to be addressed. The Minister also referred to that when she said that we need to extend the gas network to ensure that people have more choice over what sort of energy they use.

Mr Flanagan also has a habit of using the F-word in debates these days: fracking, to which the

Minister also referred. I do not know the details of that particular issue, but I am sure that there will be many more arguments about it.

Stephen Moutray proposed the amendment. He outlined that the Minister cannot set prices, and that is recognised. He also said that the construction and transport sectors are affected, so this is not only an issue of household prices, it affects how many jobs there are in the economy and causes us to lose more jobs than necessary. Mike Nesbitt also referred to the increasing levels of fuel poverty.

South Belfast Member Alasdair McDonnell emphasised that inroads had been made in regard to renewables and used the key word “sustainable”, which leads me to a major part of the problem. When he appeared before the Committee, the Utility Regulator referred to the fact that we are totally over-reliant on fossil fuels. Anna Lo made the pertinent point that Scotland is moving ahead in that regard. If we all get our heads together, there is absolutely no reason why we should not be in the same position, because we have the same potential. Look at Strangford and the coastline between Rathlin and Ballycastle; we should be a world leader in developing tidal energy technologies and using our natural resources.

Anna Lo referred to long-term sustainability and the fact that 99% of our energy needs are met through imported fuel. The Minister also said that difficult choices have to be made about renewables. I am sure that the Minister faces a lot of concerns in her constituency, as I do in North Antrim, where a lot of applications are made for wind turbines. The natural reaction from many constituents is, “Not in my backyard”. Therefore, we will sometimes face difficult choices. In his statement to the House earlier, the Education Minister said that sometimes we will have to make difficult decisions that will not be popular, but we need to have a long-sighted approach on energy if we are to ensure that we deliver in people’s best interests, particularly those in fuel poverty.

Sue Ramsey outlined the reasons put forward for price rises, including natural disasters, conflicts and more domestic issues, such as pension funds. She also said that absolute clarity and transparency are important when it comes to price rises, and you cannot disagree with that.

Mickey Brady, as Deputy Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, said that other

measures must be explored by the Minister for Social Development and the Enterprise Minister. He outlined energy brokering and social tariffs. I suppose that the most pertinent point he made was that 756 older people died of cold-related illness last year.

Sometimes during debates, we look at the statistics and forget about the reality behind them. As Michael Copeland said earlier, it is shameful that the situation continues. I welcome the fact that the Minister said that she will make a joint statement with the Minister for Social Development with regard to moving the issue forward and dealing with fuel poverty. However, it needs to be something substantial. If it is not, she needs to look at the alternatives that are available; for example, at what they are doing in Holland and Britain with regard to social tariffs. If those cases prove to be successful, we need to apply them here.

Most importantly, we must not sit back and do nothing. We can tinker around the edges and put in place minor schemes to mitigate the impacts. However, we need radical policies in place if we are to deal with the real problem here, which is the statistics relating to those who are dying as the result of fuel poverty.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the severe financial pressure on families and small businesses from the recent increase in energy prices; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to liaise with the Utility Regulator to ensure fair and affordable pricing for energy.

Adjourned at 5.21 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 27 September 2011

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to raise a matter that was raised last week in the House by Mr Allister and, subsequently, Mr McCrea. I think Mr McCrea was raising it on behalf of Mr Allister. It is around the whole issue of the speaking order in debates in the Chamber. I know some Members have quoted Standing Order 17(5). First, I refer Members to Standing Order 17(4), which requires the Business Committee to consult the Speaker about general arrangements for debates, including the order of speaking and the number of speakers in any debate in the Assembly, as mentioned in Standing Order 17(5). The arrangements for the order of speaking and for the number of speakers in any debate were agreed by the Business Committee some time ago.

I have to say that, sometimes, I think Members are raising that particular point of order out of ignorance of the business of the House. That disturbs me. Some Members have been here for some time, and I know that there are Members who are newly elected to the House, so, maybe, they still have to learn the procedures of the Assembly. To date, the Business Committee has not consulted with me under Standing Order 17(4) about any proposals to change those arrangements.

Let me say as well that Members who raise issues about the length of debates in the House and, continually, about who should speak in the House, must know that all those arrangements are made through the Business Committee in consultation with the Speaker. Members who are members of the Business Committee need to raise it in the Business Committee. There is no point raising it in points of orders in the House. If those arrangements need to be changed, that should be raised in the Business Committee.

Let me also explain the arrangements for speaking order in the House. In the first round of speakers, parties with two or more Members will be called in order of party strength. *[Interruption.]* Order. After that, the order of speaking will reflect the proportions of parties' strength in the Assembly. That has always been the case. Whenever I am in the Chair, I am always very mindful of trying to get the balance of parties in the Chamber to where we need it. Sometimes that is not always possible, but I would like to think that, as far as possible, most, if not all, the parties do quite well when it comes to speaking on any item of business in the House.

Finally, I hope that Members will accept that it has been the practice of all of us who have sat in the Chair in recent years to use our discretion in allowing single-Member parties and independent Members to contribute to debates. Let me say that that will always be the case. Let me also say that I must tell those Members from single-Member parties that it will not always be possible to get them in. We have Members who believe that, every time they put their name down on a speaking list, they should automatically get in. In fact, they go so far as to demand to get in. *[Interruption.]* Order. We also have Members who abuse Standing Orders by raising this issue continually, and then we have Members who challenge the authority of the Chair. Let me say that, from here on in, any Member who continually abuses Standing Orders will be dealt with, and any Member who continually challenges the authority of the Chair will equally be dealt with. What I mean by "dealt with" is that those Members will not be called to speak for some time in any debate in the Chamber. So, I do not want party leaders or Chief Whips coming to me to make a case for a Member who will not be called in the House for some time.

I hope that I, as the Speaker, have made my position absolutely clear this morning. If there is any issue that any Member is not sure about or

does not understand, they should please come and talk to me outside the Chamber. I will not take any points of orders on this issue this morning.

Mr Allister: I wonder why.

Mr Speaker: Order. I warn the Member that he is sailing very close to the wind in challenging the authority of the Chair. If the Member continues, he will not be called to speak in any debate in the Chamber for some time. I warn the Member, so I hope that he understands exactly where I, as Speaker, am coming from.

Ministerial Statements

FM/DFM: US Visit

Mr Speaker: The First Minister, the Rt Hon Peter Robinson, intends to make a statement to the House.

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): Mr Speaker, I am grateful to you for the opportunity to report to the Assembly on the successful visit to the United States that the deputy First Minister and I undertook from Monday 12 September to Friday 16 September. We were accompanied by the Invest NI chief executive, Alastair Hamilton, and, for the Los Angeles leg of the visit, by the NI Screen chief executive, Richard Williams.

The key purpose of our visit was to promote the local economy through a series of high-profile engagements, and we had direct engagement with senior American executives. The visit brought us to Los Angeles, Silicon Valley, Chicago and New York, and our programme concentrated on three sectors of our economy: creative industries; information and communication technology (ICT); and business services. Those sectors have been gaining significant momentum in recent months and have stimulated the interest of potential investors in the United States. The objective was twofold: to promote the tremendous potential that we have in these sectors, and to bring new jobs to Northern Ireland.

Over the past six months, there has been a concerted effort by Invest Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Screen and the Northern Ireland Bureau to highlight the best that we have to offer in the creative industries. While in Los Angeles, we met with senior executives representing industry leaders in film and television, video gaming, and mobile applications companies. We presented the Northern Ireland proposition for television and film to Warner Brothers, Sony, Disney and Fox, while consolidating our existing relationship with HBO. We also broadened our discussions, which, until now, have focused on production work, into the realm of post-production with Technicolor and Deluxe. On the video-gaming front, we established new contacts with household names such as Activision Publishing Incorporated, who are looking for just the type of game developers who are beginning to emerge from our universities.

The culmination of our time in Los Angeles was our delivery of the keynote address at the Irish Technology Leadership Group's Innovation in Entertainment event at Sony Pictures Entertainment. An audience of nearly 300 executives, ranging from film studio presidents to the leadership of global telecom companies, was exposed to an interactive technology showcase of Northern Ireland products, followed by presentations in which the deputy First Minister and I highlighted the dynamic talent pool that exists here.

On the political front, we were welcomed to city hall by Los Angeles mayor Villaraigosa, who was keen to discuss economic development and green technology and share best practice in dealing with disadvantaged youth. There are already close contacts between the PSNI and the Los Angeles Police Department, and this was an opportunity to explore additional links at political and community level.

It is also worth noting that we had a very productive meeting with Chancellor Gene Block and his senior colleagues from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). The chancellor has put forward a proposal to establish links between UCLA, Queen's University and the University of Ulster on conflict resolution. There have been a number of instances of ethnic and religious tensions on campus, and he indicated that there is much to be gained from a relationship with Northern Ireland.

In Silicon Valley we met an existing investor, Hewlett-Packard, and promoted the ICT opportunities that exist in Northern Ireland at an Invest NI-hosted event involving senior business people in the technology sector.

In Chicago, our focus shifted to the development and cultivation of the business/financial services sector, when we met potential and existing investors, such as Allstate. We also met the chief executive officer of United Continental Holdings Incorporated to re-enforce the importance of the Newark-Belfast route to Northern Ireland.

In New York city, we opened First Derivatives plc's new office in the financial district. First Derivatives plc, which is headquartered in Newry, counts among its customers many of the world's top investment banks, brokers and hedge funds. The opening of the New York office is a clear demonstration that locally grown companies can compete at the top of the

financial services ladder. We concluded our visit by attending a meeting with senior executives from the New York Stock Exchange Euronext, which is an important and high-profile investor.

Throughout our visit, we engaged directly with some of the most senior business executives in those sectors that offer the greatest potential for investment in Northern Ireland. We were also able to emphasise our personal commitment to each company and to assure it that the Executive are united in their objective of supporting inward investment.

We are hopeful that the continuing efforts of Invest NI and the time commitment that we made will be rewarded in the near future with the creation of new, high-quality, sustainable jobs.

Mr Elliott (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I thank the First Minister for that update. Was there any discussion of the promotion of jobs and businesses to Northern Ireland because of the possibility of the lowering of corporation tax, or at least the possibility that Northern Ireland may be able to vary the rate of corporation tax? My question comes on the back of Minister Wilson's suggestion last week that corporation tax may not be reduced for four years, although at least the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment said later in the week that it may come earlier. I assume, and hope, that the First Minister will confirm that. It will be a huge attraction to the US.

Mr P Robinson: Virtually every company that one speaks to is keen to establish what progress is being made in relation to Northern Ireland having the ability to set its own level of corporation tax and become more competitive. That would be a distinct advantage for us. We have a package that is already competitive in the global market; making a dent in corporation tax would make us unbeatable.

As to when we might be in a position to do so, the Government are considering the consultation responses, which were overwhelmingly in favour of Northern Ireland having the power to lower corporation tax, and they will then announce their next steps.

10.45 am

In relation to the Finance Minister's statement, I think that the Member needs to look more carefully at what the Finance Minister said.

He indicated that there would be a lead-in time, but I suspect that there will be no delay if the Executive have satisfactory opportunity to take over corporation tax powers. However, they might well determine that there will be a delayed or phased start. Therefore, the financial implications for our Budget would not be felt until the tail end of the present comprehensive spending review period.

Mr Spratt: I thank the First Minister for his statement to the House this morning. Will he recount the feedback that he received directly from senior US executives on their experiences of investing in Northern Ireland? In particular, will he outline any views expressed about Invest Northern Ireland?

Mr P Robinson: I might not always have been able to make this kind of comment, because, for many years, there were a lot of criticisms of Invest Northern Ireland and its predecessors. However, I have to say that every single investor that we meet who has been dealing with Invest Northern Ireland speaks glowingly — and I do not think that I overstate the case — of the interaction that they have had with it. I have watched the team as we have gone around the US and other places, and I think that we have the highest standard of personnel involved, and they serve us well.

I should also add that we have a first-class team at the Northern Ireland Bureau in the United States, and this gives me an opportunity to put on record our appreciation to Norman Houston, who will be leaving that job soon. He is the most diligent worker, apart from the fact that if you visit the United States, he can arrange 4.30 am wake-up calls and keep you until 1.30 am the next morning with dinner engagements. He has been a tremendous asset, and the Department that gets him when he comes back to Northern Ireland will be well rewarded.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement, and I especially welcome his remarks regarding creative industries and disadvantaged youth. Will he assure us that when he is looking at the development of any future investment in creative industries here, people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and disadvantaged youth in particular, will be given equal opportunity of access to, and employment in, those industries?

Mr P Robinson: Creative industries have a wide span, and although some elements might be

place-specific, others, quite frankly, can be done anywhere. Sound, special effects and some digital work can literally be undertaken in a back room, provided that you have data access, in this case, to north America. Therefore, there are opportunities for every part of the Province to benefit. We have people coming out of our universities with skills that are in tune with what is being required, particularly in the west coast of the United States.

As regards film and television, companies already in Northern Ireland, such as HBO, are using skilled people at every level, whether it is carpenters, gardeners, or whatever, as part of their production team. Therefore, there are opportunities for every section of our community. Where there are opportunities for people who have been unemployed or for those who earn low wages, I think that we will want to jump all over those opportunities and ensure that people get the chance to really step up.

Mr McDevitt: I acknowledge the First Minister and deputy First Minister's reaching out to the gaming and creative industries, their reconnection with existing investors, and their celebration of the success of local companies operating in the United States during their trip. However, that will really mean something back home in Northern Ireland only if real jobs are brought over. Can the First Minister tell the House how many jobs were secured for Northern Ireland during the last trip to the United States?

Mr P Robinson: There is an opportunity for some Members, when asking questions, to show what they know about a subject and for some Members to show just how little they know about a subject. I thought that somebody standing for the leadership of his party would know a bit more about what time lag means for investment. Any opportunities that arise from our visit to the United States —

Mr McDevitt: None. Zero.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr P Robinson: — will probably not be seen for many months to come. Any company that is taking an investment decision will look at a variety of issues. It will want to test the market in various parts of the globe. I think that our record is second to none. Indeed, had the Member taken a bit of time to do his research, he would have found that, London excepted, Northern Ireland has attracted more foreign

direct investment than anywhere else in the United Kingdom.

Mr McDevitt: Answer the question.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr P Robinson: We have a first-class record in bringing jobs back to Northern Ireland. The presence here of companies from the United States, such as the New York Stock Exchange Euronext, Citi, Terex Corporation and Dow Chemical Company, bears testimony to the good work that has been done. I have very real hopes that new jobs will come to Northern Ireland as a direct result of the visit, and I look forward to announcements about those jobs.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the First Minister for his statement and welcome the positive engagement with investors in the US. He mentioned the video gaming sector and discussed helping disadvantaged youth. He will be aware of alternative education programmes in his constituency that develop the skills of young people from that background. What plans does he have to connect those young people with opportunities in the sector that may emerge as a result of the visit?

Mr P Robinson: A number of existing companies, not just in East Belfast but in many parts of the Province, will benefit from jobs in the creative industries sector. I recently visited a company in my constituency that provides score and background music for film and television. The real benefit of a number of the digital and sound technology elements is that they can be done at remote locations, which gives us the opportunity to be able to do work in Northern Ireland and to transfer that quickly to where it is required.

Invest Northern Ireland will, of course, look at opportunities, and our task will be to ensure that our universities can take up those opportunities as they come by using the existing pool of skills. The Invest Northern Ireland team is always able to point to the level of skill that is available in Northern Ireland. We have the best-educated young people in the whole of the United Kingdom. Statistically, that is a proven fact. One will find a younger population in Northern Ireland than in almost anywhere else in Europe. Some 60% of our population is under the age of 40. We have two leading universities in the Province, the skills from which are first class. Therefore, the opportunities to plug in are there and will continue to be there. If the

Member has any specific issue that he wants to raise on the matter, I hope that he will contact either me or the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and we will be happy to make connections for him.

Mr Ross: I thank the First Minister for today's statement. The House will know the importance, not only for tourism but for business, of the transatlantic link between New York and Northern Ireland. The First Minister indicated that he met the CEO of United Continental Holdings on the US trip. Will the First Minister update the House on his understanding of the latest position with air passenger duty and tell us whether we will see some progress made on that issue soon?

Mr P Robinson: I think that everybody in the House knows just how important that direct connection is. It has been a selling point for Invest Northern Ireland and Ministers on their visits to the US. It was an important factor in the New York Stock Exchange's coming here, as it was for other companies, including Bombardier. On my return visit, using that Continental route, I was approached by some Bombardier staff who were coming back to Northern Ireland. It is a regular business route for a number of key investors in Northern Ireland.

As I indicated in my statement, during the visit, we met the CEO of United Continental. We appreciated the fact that, like Northern Ireland people, he is the kind of person who expresses clearly what his views are on issues. I must say that he is exactly the kind of person who I would want as CEO if I were investing in a company. He made it clear that air passenger duty was making that route unprofitable for him. We made immediate contact with the Secretary of State and the Minister of State. The progress that we have made on that issue is an excellent example of the good working relationship between the United Kingdom Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. We had immediate access to the top. We had instant action from the top. Indeed, I believe that a favourable statement from the Chancellor is anticipated later today. All who support the preservation of that route will welcome its continued existence.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Chéad Aire inniu. Given the ongoing concerns of the House over ever-rising energy prices and the

recent indication by GlaxoSmithKline that any further expansion by it on this island is as reliant on the availability of affordable energy as on low corporation tax, can the Minister confirm whether the Executive accept that rising energy prices are a potential major obstacle to attracting foreign direct investment and whether they will take immediate action on that issue?

Mr P Robinson: Anything that increases the cost of doing business in Northern Ireland has an impact on the overall attractiveness of the Northern Ireland product. Clearly, therefore, it is having an impact, particularly on those companies that are heavily reliant on energy. As far as the Executive are concerned, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, obviously, has direct responsibility for the issue. Of course, there are difficulties in interfering or involving the Executive in issues that are, effectively, private sector matters. However, on the edges, steps can be taken. Anything that can be done will be done by the Minister and the Executive.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the First Minister for his statement. I, too, support his comments about Norman Houston and the work that he has done consistently for Northern Ireland in the United States. Can the First Minister inform the House about the work that Northern Ireland Screen has done in the United States to benefit Northern Ireland?

Mr P Robinson: Of course, the work of Northern Ireland Screen goes on not only in the United States but in other parts of the globe. Its success and that of the Department more generally can be seen in the success of bringing Universal Studios and HBO to carry out work in Northern Ireland and in the fact that not only was the pilot and the first series of HBO's 'Game of Thrones' filmed here but filming has started on the second series. When we spoke to HBO, it was clear that it sees 'Game of Thrones' as one of its great success stories. Obviously, its positioning in Northern Ireland will be advantageous in the long term. The great advantage of that from Northern Ireland Screen's point of view is that it has a product that it can showcase to other people in television and film. The Executive are very pleased with the progress that has been made and opportunities that have been derived. We wish Northern Ireland Screen well in attracting key producers to Northern Ireland in the future.

With regard to the general role of television and film in Northern Ireland, I might also add that, several years ago, Northern Ireland was probably the last destination that any film or television company would have considered.

11.00 am

We should not underestimate the importance of stable political structures and peace in Northern Ireland in attracting those people in particular. Politicians who think that it is good politics to go out and rubbish Northern Ireland and try to create instability have a direct impact on the jobs that are available to people in Northern Ireland. Those who try to drag us back, as some do, even some in this House, should think twice about the impact of that, even in their own constituencies.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the First Minister for his statement and his good work in promoting Northern Ireland abroad.

Like many others, I am particularly keen to see the creative industries boosted. Looking ahead to the arrival of the MTV Europe music awards next year, has the First Minister had an opportunity to assess the potential damage from the news that the pop icon Rihanna was foiled in her filming ambitions yesterday, which were no more sinister than to appear in a field dressed in red, white and blue?

Mr P Robinson: I am pretty sure that there was no problem with the colours involved. I take it that the Member has a field on his estate, so if she needs an alternative filming location he will be happy to offer her that.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the First Minister for his statement. All of us wish well the progress on investment for all of us in Northern Ireland that could be brought about by such visits. I suspect that, if the First Minister and deputy First Minister had gone to America with a lower rate of corporation tax in their back pockets, or at least the promise of it in the near future, there might have been greater attendance and greater interest. Will the First Minister comment on that? What is his assessment of the potential for Northern Ireland in relation to the creative industries?

Mr P Robinson: The Member is right: if a lower level of corporation tax were part of the Northern Ireland product, it would become much more exciting for many. We have to recognise

that there are some business opportunities out there that are not reliant on corporation tax, because they will be back-office and their profits will therefore not be realised in the UK. There are some types of business that will be very tuned in to what is happening with corporation tax, although even our present rate of corporation tax is lower than the rate paid by many in the United States.

As far as the creative industries are concerned, it is evident from the large numbers of people who have come forward to be part of the HBO and Universal experience and who have looked for the 600 or 700 jobs that have been created that there are massive opportunities, which is why we are moving ahead with the building of the second studio at the Titanic Quarter. That is also why we look at the opportunities for satellite locations: HBO uses about four locations in Northern Ireland, which, again, helps the local economy. It is bringing millions of pounds of spend into our local economy.

That is just film and television. The big opportunities lie in digital technology, sound effects, music and all of those areas. One might even include politics in the creative industries bracket. There are massive opportunities for improvement all round. A lot of young people need to start looking at doing STEM subjects in our universities so that we have people coming forward to take the jobs that will be created as a result of those new opportunities.

Mr Dickson: I thank the First Minister for his statement and his encouraging words this morning about the transportation links to the United States, given the number of users of those links in my constituency, particularly FG Wilson, which has strong trade links with the USA.

First Minister, given the emphasis that you put on the film, TV and video-gaming industries, did you receive any firm commitments or strong indications that the companies that you met intend to invest in Northern Ireland?

Mr P Robinson: I do not want to go into detail about specific companies. There are companies that we had follow-up meetings with that look very hopeful. The opportunities are there, and until the propositions are over the line it is better to say very little about them. There are also opportunities in financial services that are close to the line and we look forward in the next number of months to seeing the fruits of this visit.

Mr Cree: I also thank the First Minister for his statement. It is, indeed, very important work. I note the three sectors of the economy that were covered in his statement, but will the First Minister identify whether any Northern Ireland niche industries were of particular interest to our American cousins?

Mr P Robinson: As I go around the United States, we no longer have to argue about the skill set that is available in Northern Ireland; it is taken almost as read by every investor you meet. The word spreads in the United States. People look at the companies that are here. When Ministers from Northern Ireland go to the United States, everybody would expect them to tell people just how good Northern Ireland is. However, the best selling point that we have is that over 70% of the companies that come to Northern Ireland reinvest in Northern Ireland. That means that they have tested Northern Ireland, found it beneficial and decided to invest again. That simple statistic is the best selling point that you can have when you go to any investor in the United States. The other thing that we always do is try to team them up with companies that have come to Northern Ireland.

As far as niche areas are concerned, for a very long time Invest Northern Ireland has been looking at financial services, business services, ICT, the creative industries and the new green economy. Those are the areas where there is a concentration by Invest Northern Ireland and where the value-added jobs will be found that will increase the GVA of Northern Ireland as a whole.

Mr Givan: I commend the First Minister for the work that he is doing to drive forward that particular area of our economy. In his time as Finance Minister, significant funding was allocated to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to develop the creative industries. He has shown a clear commitment over the past number of years, and has taken forward that in his role as First Minister. Following his meetings in the United States with HBO and Disney, can the First Minister tell us how much of a deterrent to major US TV productions' coming to Northern Ireland is the UK Government's refusal to extend tax credits to TV in addition to film productions?

Mr P Robinson: I am not sure I would use the term "refusal", because the United Kingdom Government have been ahead of most other countries in the film tax credits that they give.

There is an opportunity for the United Kingdom Government to substantially increase the level of television production in the UK, and we in Northern Ireland would probably benefit more than most if they were to do that.

The deputy First Minister and I spoke to the Secretary of State Owen Paterson about that issue just days ago. We hope that the sector itself will be putting a paper to the Chancellor on the issue, and we would very much support that. A distinction can, perhaps, be made between giving tax credits to television per se and giving them to certain types of television work. Perhaps it is best defined by the amount of money that is spent on a series. We are not talking about giving tax credits for 'EastEnders' or 'Coronation Street'; we are talking about doing it for major television series, and we will press that issue with the United Kingdom Government, as I think the sector will. That is an area of opportunity, and it is not so much a refusal by the Government as their not yet having agreed to it.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the First Minister for his statement. I note that, during the visit, Chancellor Block of the University of California outlined proposals to establish links between the University of California, Queen's University and the University of Ulster. Will the First Minister outline what collaboration exists between the United States and Northern Ireland universities? What potential is there for the future?

Mr P Robinson: Most of the major US companies that are based in Northern Ireland already have contacts with the University of Ulster and with Queen's in relation to research and development work. Our two universities are probably ahead of the field in having a good working relationship with companies, not just in R&D work but in ensuring that their students come out with the kind of skills that companies are looking for.

UCLA has a particular interest in conflict resolution. We told it of our exciting proposals for the Maze/Long Kesh, which have excited a lot of people who deal with conflict resolution. We want to ensure that the site will attract international as well as local use. UCLA is looking at a particular project, as it has some tensions on campus, perhaps more on an ethnic than religious basis, that it wants to address proactively. It sees the kind of work that has been done in Northern Ireland as fitting comfortably with the kind of work that it needs to do. We are

looking at direct contact between the universities, and politicians in Northern Ireland will be asked to play a part in that project.

Mr Allister: I was tempted to ask the First Minister whether it was something that he said or did in the United States that caused his partner, the deputy First Minister, to look for alternative employment.

Mr Speaker: Order. I must say that the Member really does push the barriers. I have said in this House for some time — *[Interruption.]* I have said in this House for some time that questions sometimes grow legs. Quite obviously, that is what the Member intends this morning. *[Interruption.]*

Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. I will now move on. *[Interruption.]* Order. The Member needs to learn the lesson that there are protocols, Standing Orders and conventions of this House that relate to him, as they do to any other Member.

Mr Allister: Only to me.

Mr Speaker: Order. I now say to the Member directly that the Member will not be called in any debate in this House for some time.

Mr Allister: You are doing your master's bidding.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Allister: Your peerage is safe.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member will not be called to speak in this House for some time.

Mr Allister: This House is a disgrace to democracy.

Mr Speaker: Order. Take your seat and sit down.

Mr Allister: This House is a disgrace to basic democracy. There is a voice, and it will be heard whether you, Mr Speaker, like it or not.

Mr Speaker: Order. I know what the Member is trying to do: he is almost trying to be a martyr. I know exactly what the Member is trying to do. The Member should take his seat and be quiet. We will now move on.

Order, Members. That ends questions to the First Minister and deputy First Minister's statement. We now move on to a statement from the Minister of Health, Social Services —

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would like you to look at the remarks made by the Member for North Antrim, who squeaked in on the eighth or ninth count without reaching the quota.

Mr Allister: What about East Belfast? What about Westminster?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr P Robinson: He claimed that you were “doing your master’s bidding” and that “your peerage is safe”. Those contemptuous remarks need a response, and I ask you to look at them.

Health and Social Care Services

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety wishes to make a statement to the House.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I wish to make a statement to the Assembly on the review of health and social care (HSC) services. In June, I announced a review of health and social care here to examine the future provision of services, including our acute hospital configuration, the development of primary healthcare services and social care, and the interfaces between sectors.

I initiated the review to set a new reform agenda that will give new and much stronger momentum for progress towards my vision and purpose for health and social care in Northern Ireland, which I think is widely shared and supported. Everyone wants the best possible service. There is also very wide recognition of the need to focus on health and well-being through prevention and a strong public health agenda, not just on services. However, those aspirations have not had enough impact on our ways of working and the benefits that can be delivered for the population. Given the current economic context, that is even more important than previously.

11.15 am

I want the review to ensure that health and social care services are focused, shaped and equipped to improve the quality of care and outcomes for the population and to provide value for money in financially challenging times. It is clear that the delivery of the full range of services in Northern Ireland is unsustainable in its current form if we are to deliver the best outcomes for citizens and maintain the highest level of quality and safety of services.

Here, as in all parts of the Western World, we face a combination of demographic change with an ageing population, advances in medicine and technology, and rising public expectations. The effect is to make it necessary to continue the reform journey of the NHS model of universal care.

The three key principles are that health services are generally free at the point of delivery, funded by taxation and promise that the best available cost-effective treatments or services will be provided. I believe that the Assembly is fully committed to those principles, but we have to recognise the fact that the

rising level of need for health and social care services, the need to focus on outcomes and the increasingly constrained financial context make it increasingly difficult to hold to those NHS principles. I believe that we can continue to deliver those principles only if we support a radical programme of service change and reconfiguration, and act strongly and corporately in the interests of all the people whom we serve, even when that means making difficult decisions at constituency level.

I want that to be the main backdrop to the planning process that we must undertake and the decisions that will have to be made over the coming years. Fundamentally, the largest element is that there needs to be a shift from the hospital setting as the key focus of health service provision to the community.

I want the review to be led by the vision that I have summarised and by the need to secure the quality and safety of services for all parts of Northern Ireland. I expect and hope that leaders across health and social care services will speak up and contribute to leading the process of change. It is not just about cost cutting, although there is a need to adjust to a very challenging budgetary context. I believe that if we address the key issues, we can and will find a way forward that can meet the needs and aspirations of our community.

We face challenging times, not just in the health and social care sector but with the economy in general. The Executive provided the health and social care sector with some protection through the Budget settlement by increasing spending by 8% from £4.3 billion in 2011-12 to £4.6 billion in 2014. That may sound generous, but given the increasing demands faced by the health and social care sector, it is a very difficult settlement indeed.

England faces the unprecedented challenge of delivering cost improvements of £20 billion, or 4% a year for four years. The position here is similar. If the same level of service provision was delivered in the same pattern as previously, we would face an estimated shortfall against assessed needs of approximately £800 million in 2014-15. It is incumbent on us all to make the best use of every penny of taxpayers' money that is provided for health and social care services here.

Let me be clear: I fully acknowledge the difficult economic climate in which we operate, and, within that context, my primary focus is on

quality, accessibility and safety of patient care. We must, therefore, focus on using resources in the right way and spending our money on the right things. My vision for the future of health and social care services is that we drive up the quality of care for clients and patients, improve outcomes and enhance the patient and client experience. In part, that must involve improving productivity and ensuring that the resources are used wisely. That should not come as a surprise to anyone.

We should always strive to deliver efficient and cost-effective services in every area of public service. We need a greater involvement of front line professionals in decision-making and service development. Local commissioning of services should have an increasingly important role to play in future in driving change, innovation and service improvement. I would also like to see increasing involvement of the charity and voluntary sectors in providing services.

I have stated that I want to see a shift in care from hospitals to the community. We have to be responsive to the world we live in and treat patients at a time and place that is convenient for them. I want to see patients being treated in the right place, at the right time and by the right people; that means limiting and, where possible, eliminating unnecessary hospital admissions. Too much work is being carried out in hospitals that should be carried out at primary care level. It will mean ensuring the provision of good intermediate care, rehabilitation and community support.

We need to promote the use of multidisciplinary community teams for chronic conditions such as heart failure and chest disease. Through managing such long-term conditions in the primary and community sector we will provide the information, support and early interventions that will enable people to manage their conditions better and maintain their independence. We will also reduce the number of avoidable hospital admissions. People who are provided with that type of support are more likely to experience better health and well-being, use their medicines effectively, remain at home and have greater confidence. They will also have a sense of control and better mental health.

The recommendations of the health and social care review will provide a firm basis on which we can proceed in the planning, development and delivery of services. Part of our success will

be judged by the extent to which we are able to challenge the status quo, stop doing what does not work and acknowledge that the current design of some of today's services is no longer fit for purpose. We need to be innovative in our approach, build on what is good and learn from our experiences.

We also have to take account of evidence on how the arrangements for the delivery of services in the Republic of Ireland and in other parts of the United Kingdom have operated, and to identify opportunities for co-operation with service providers there in helping to realise the objectives for health and social care here. Although we have to live within our means, the focus and motivation of the review is not about saving money. It is about improving the quality of services, the outcomes for service users and the overall patient and client experience.

Changing the configuration of how, where and when services are delivered is only one part of the equation. We need to encourage greater personal responsibility among members of the public for their own health and well-being in relation to what they eat, how much alcohol they consume, how much exercise they take and the way in which they look after their own health and well-being. That will require a sustained and growing investment in public health, early diagnosis and early intervention services to support individuals to make healthier choices.

We must also manage demand and expectations by ensuring that usage of the health and social care services is appropriate. Accident and emergency departments in our hospitals, for example, should be dealing with accidents and emergencies. They should not be used as a surrogate for services already provided by GP's and other primary care providers. The Ambulance Service should be called only when genuinely needed.

In moving forward, I want to promote greater involvement of front line professionals in decision-making. They know better than anyone else what is working particularly well in their ward or clinic, what needs fine-tuned and where broader improvements can be made across the service. Their input is vital to successful delivery of safe and effective services.

I believe that the voluntary and community sector has an important contribution to make in offering services and assisting health and social care to find solutions to complex issues. You

would have to travel a long way to find a more dedicated workforce than the nurses and other staff in Northern Ireland's health and social care services. However, elements of the third sector also have a strong track record in specific areas such as mental health, dementia, brain injury and learning disability. We should embrace that and benefit from it.

I will not shy away from using private providers too, where it makes sense for us to do so. Our small population means that the private sector will only ever play a relatively minor role compared with Great Britain, but it is still a crucial one in relation to nursing home provision, for instance. I will not be setting out to use independent providers for the sake of it, but where there is a clear case that they can deliver a high-quality, safe service for a lower cost to the taxpayer, it would be irresponsible of me not to make use of them.

The review is necessary to ensure the realisation of my vision for health and social care. Difficult choices must be made and priorities set. We must stop doing what does not work, become more assertive in challenging out-of-date practices and acknowledge that some of today's services and their current design are no longer fit for purpose.

I believe that reconfiguration of service delivery is needed to protect patient safety and enhance effectiveness. I also believe that it is a powerful means of improving access to and equality of services for all our citizens who need and deserve them.

I published the review's terms of reference on 25 August. I have asked John Compton, chief executive of the Health and Social Care Board and acting in an ex officio capacity, to lead the review, which will draw on external expertise in the form of an expert panel whose membership is drawn from a variety of relevant backgrounds, including health and social care, policy, clinical business and academic work. The panel comprises Professor Chris Ham, chief executive of the King's Fund; Professor Deirdre Heenan, provost and dean of academic development at the University of Ulster; Dr Ian Rutter, a general practitioner; Paul Simpson, a retired civil servant; and Mark Ennis, the executive chair of SSE Ireland.

I have made it clear that the review must be evidence-based, with robust analyses and conclusions on future service delivery. The expert panel will provide independent assurance

on the approach, methodology, analyses and conclusions of the review. I am confident that the review will benefit immensely from the experience and knowledge of the expert panel members. I have set a challenging timescale for the completion of the review, because it is important that clarity is provided urgently on the future direction of health and social care here. I have asked the review team to provide me with a report by 30 November 2011. Health and social care cannot continue to operate as it has done. There are simply not the resources to do so, and action will be required to ensure that we provide safe and effective services to the people here for the future.

I have also made it clear that I want the review to be conducted in an open and transparent manner. To facilitate that, I have asked the review team to ensure that there are appropriate opportunities for public consultation and engagement with key stakeholders. Where appropriate, I will also consult on the implications of the final review report. We face difficult challenges, and we need an evidence-based debate on how we move forward. It is important that there are opportunities for effective consultation with the public, and I want anyone who feels that they have a contribution to make, or who wishes their voice to be heard, to be able to provide comments. Those who have a view on how we can face all those challenges have the opportunity to make their case to the review, and they should do so.

It will not be possible for the review team to hold separate meetings with every interested group, particularly in view of the timescales for the work. The review team has set up a website to receive comments and to disseminate information relating to the review's progress. The website will signpost interested groups and individuals towards a range of ways that they can express their views. I am confident that the review's findings and recommendations will enable me to plan and ensure that money is spent on the right things at the right time in the right place, while enhancing overall quality of care and patient experience. A key aspect of that will be the delivery of more services in the community and in people's homes.

For the medium to long term, decisions on reconfiguring health and social care will be based on the outcome of the review, and my longer-term priorities and objectives for HSC will be informed by it. Members should note

that I expect to have to make some necessary and tough decisions. However, I will not make any long-term decisions or set any long-term priorities or objectives for health and social care in Northern Ireland without the full range of information being available to me. There will be consultation with stakeholders and the public on any major reconfiguration of services proposed in the light of the review's recommendations. Nothing has been agreed or ruled out at this stage, and nor should it be. I can state with certainty that we face unacceptable risks if change does not happen.

I intend to report back to the Assembly and the Health Committee on the progress of the review of the HSC service in due course. I thank Members for their support in taking the review forward. We need to provide strategic leadership in progressing this important work. It is vital, particularly in these challenging times when hard decisions must be taken, that we all pull together for the good and the health of the people of Northern Ireland. I commend the statement to the House.

Ms Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh míle maith agaibh, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. Given that his budget is double what it was 10 years ago, there is certainly scope for managing that budget better without impacting on front line services.

I have a couple of points to make. The terms of reference for the review indicated that consultation would not happen. I welcome what seems to be a shift in that position.

I imagine that the Minister will face some resistance from consultants, who have benefited from the prioritisation of hospital work to date. That group has managed to extract £11 million in bonuses every year from the Department. How does the Minister plan to get that group on board, in order to achieve his priorities?

11.30 am

Mr Poots: The enhanced bonuses that consultants have received will not happen again this year. Most people enter the medical field because they have, to a greater or lesser extent, a passion to help others. People who become consultants generally leave school with many opportunities to go into a variety of fields, in some of which they could earn considerably

more money, such as business or legal areas of responsibility. Many of them choose to become doctors because they care for other people and want to help them. In Northern Ireland, we need the support of everyone in the health and social care sector to make improvements. Many consultants want to move things forward and recognise that we really need to change and challenge things. I have had the opportunity to speak to many of them, and they recognise the importance of changing the service.

I note that the Chairperson of the Committee recognises that there is a strongly held desire to bring more care services to the primary care level and move them away from the acute level, to deliver a better kind of service to the public. Most consultants recognise that also.

Mr Wells: The Minister has clearly outlined perhaps one of the most significant documents to have appeared on the health scene in Northern Ireland for at least a decade; only 'Developing Better Services' in 2002 is more significant. He has outlined what will happen between now and 30 November. Will he outline in detail what input the public will have once the document is published? Will the document be the subject of a debate in the Assembly?

Mr Poots: It certainly will. The document will go through a process, and public consultation will take place. There will be opportunities for the public to write in and express their point of view. There will be opportunities for interest groups, including the trade unions and the various representative bodies of professionals, to make their case as to what should and should not happen in future.

How we proceed after the review is concluded will be down to ministerial choices and decisions. We will decide whether we will implement the review and how we will do so. I am minded to implement it. It is my duty as Minister to consult the House, the Health Committee and the public on key decisions that affect them. Once the review is completed, there will be public consultations on those decisions.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister's statement and the acceptance that there was an £800 million shortfall, about which there seemed to be some dispute. He put strong emphasis on the need to encourage greater personal responsibility among members of the public and engage with them about their health. I am fully supportive of that. Before the election,

his party expressed a commitment to double spending in that area. How does that sit with its recommendation to do away with the Public Health Agency or merge it into the board? If the review wants to keep it, will it or his election manifesto take priority?

Mr Poots: The £800 million shortfall exists if you do nothing. There may have been Ministers who thought that sitting for four years doing nothing was a good policy. That may have been the view of previous Ministers, but it is not the view of the current Minister. I will take actions to ensure that we do not have an £800 million shortfall and will change the health service to accommodate public finances.

The public health agenda is critical. As Minister, I will not get any personal benefit from investing in it, but I am wholly committed to it. We need to make a challenge to bring about a generational change. Indeed, this morning, I was in Craigavon with representatives from NIPPA and CAWT launching an initiative called 'Healthier Families, Healthier Choices'. It is about educating children from the earliest years about lifestyle choices, the diets that they choose, good exercise and obesity. Those are the things that will reduce the burden on the health service in the future, and future generations will get real benefit from the actions that we take now.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement. I am sure that he will concede that, if there were a ward for review fatigue, it would be quite full. This is the second day that the public are to be informed of cuts across the public sector.

The Minister talked about a shift from hospital care to community care. That is a long-standing principle that goes back to the Thatcher years. Will the Minister assure us that the money that is saved from the closure of hospitals will go into resources in the community before the hospitals are closed?

Mr Poots: That is an interesting comment, but I am not sure whether the Member is right. She talked about going back to the Thatcher years and about closing hospitals, but no one has mentioned closing hospitals. We are talking about improving services and living within our budget. We need to offer a different kind of service to achieve that. We can make considerable savings by having fully equipped diabetes clinics and chest clinics to ensure that many people do not end up needing hospital

care. The shift from acute care to primary care is absolutely necessary, and, in the first instance, we need to establish qualitative primary care, where people do not require to go to hospital. We are not about closing hospitals but about providing the right level of care at the right location and having the need matched with the service. Let us get the proper requirement for the community in the first instance and then take whatever happens thereafter.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his statement. It contained a lot of detail, but there was also a lot of waffle. The Minister said:

“it is not just about cost cutting”

and:

“the review is not about saving money”.

He also said:

“We must stop doing what does not work”.

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to come to a question.

Mr McCarthy: I am coming to it, but this is very important. The Minister will know perfectly well what works, namely minor injuries units and the services provided by chemists and pharmacies up and down the land, which are threatened. Those services keep people away from GPs and out of hospital. Will the Minister give an assurance that the review will consider properly how we can address demand pressures through a full consideration of prevention and early intervention with public health? I draw his attention to his officials —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCarthy: I could go on.

Mr Poots: The Member’s point on pharmacists is puerile. I made my position on the public health agenda clear to the previous Member who spoke.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I am encouraged that the review is to include consultation with the public and with stakeholders. I agree with the Minister that a big change is required in the delivery of service in Northern Ireland. Should the review find a need for redundancies, will that be done in consultation with the unions?

Mr Poots: We have not had any redundancies heretofore. We were told and the public were

told earlier this year that there would be 4,000 redundancies this year to enable us to live within our means.

Mr Wells: Who said that, John?

Mr Poots: I cannot recall who said it — well, I can. However, I have not had to make any compulsory redundancies. Let us be clear about that: we are not about doing away with people’s jobs or making compulsory redundancies. The review team will consult the unions because they are important stakeholders in the review. They have a significant role in the future planning, commissioning and delivery of health and social care services, and they will have the opportunity to provide their analysis during the review. I do not want to prejudge the outcome of the review; let us see what happens. However, I certainly regard the trade unions as key players in helping us to draw our analysis for the review, to understand the needs of HSC and, indeed, to deliver a quality service to the public thereafter.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Minister, there is a particular focus on moving services from hospitals to a community setting. We need to hear that the budget is shifting along with that. The fear out there is that more services will be delivered privately and the quality of care will slip. How do you intend to address that?

Mr Poots: We will see what the review comes up with, but, at this stage, my view is that we need to provide the quality services in the community setting first. You cannot cut hospital services, transfer the money over and expect to get an outcome. You need to provide the alternative service first and act on what is needed thereafter. So, we need a significant investment in community services. I have my ideas on that, and we will see whether the review team’s ideas coincide with mine or whether new things come into play. We have an expert panel of people who have huge expertise on the issues and have worked on them in many other scenarios. I want to hear their views, put them to the House and, hopefully, be in a position to adopt them.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement. How will stakeholders, patients, clients and carers benefit from the review?

Mrs D Kelly: Longer waiting times.

Mr Poots: Again, the Member tries to make a glib remark from a sedentary position. We are

not about looking at longer waiting times; that will not benefit people. Let us see whether we can deal with people in a more appropriate way. I sometimes think that Members just want to blank out reality. There are certain realities. Some people think that we should go down the South American route, where you ignore the fact that you have a budget, keep spending and, at the end of the year, expect the UK Exchequer to come up with more money. That is the most undesirable option for people and staff because it would end up with services not being provided, people not being paid and our system grinding to a halt immediately. Others, including the previous Minister, went for the Castro option, whereby health was such an important issue that we invested in it to the detriment of everything else. My view is that we need an all-encompassing Budget that ensures that all services move forward in Northern Ireland. If you do not take either of those options and have a particular budget to live within, you look at how you can do things better and how you can make better use of your money.

Other Members may not wish to drive out waste. I intend to drive out waste. Other Members may not wish to initiate change because it might cause difficulties in their constituency. I intend to drive through change irrespective of those difficulties. At this point, we need people with a little courage, and, if you cannot stand the heat, Members, get out of the kitchen. If we do not initiate and embrace change in the health service and ensure that we provide a quality of service to the public, we will not deliver. I am not about not delivering. We are a party of delivery, as people well know. The electorate judged us on that.

11.45 am

Mr Gardiner: I also thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the Minister's shift towards primary care, with large primary care centres to act as a triage for hospital admissions. Will the Minister put in place the necessary training in such centres so that triage work will be effective, and will he explore the deployment of GPs with special interests?

Mr Poots: The Member has got to the nub of what we should be about, and I thank him for his question. We will make better use of primary care centres by more often getting under one roof GPs and allied health professionals working closely together to develop their skills, with

specialist GPs within a wider group of GPs, so that a series of specialisms is available to the public. That will deliver a better service, closer to people and more cost-effective. Some people may have difficulties because it is more cost-effective, but I think that it is good to deliver a better and cost-effective service. You call that a win-win. Perhaps that has passed some Members by.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank you for your statement, Minister, in which care in the community was mentioned a lot. Over the years, many documents have been published, such as 'Putting People First' and 'Care in the Community', that came to nothing. The reality is that some trusts have cut meals on wheels services. In a day, pensioners might have contact only with the person delivering those meals. That service is being cut; people are being asked to pay for it. The Minister also talked about multidisciplinary community teams. Will he ensure that the proper support infrastructure is put in place for those who want to remain in the community but cannot for health reasons? People are living longer, but they are not necessarily living healthier. By 2020, our ageing population will have doubled.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member come to his question?

Mr Brady: Will the Minister ensure that the proper infrastructure is put in place for the most vulnerable people in our community?

Mr Poots: The Member usefully brings us to the social care aspect, and it should be remembered that this is not just about health; it is about social care. He expressed concern about some problems. There have been reductions in meals on wheels and so forth. We need to look at that because, if this review is to do what I outlined and if we are to encourage people to live in the community, we have to assist them to do that. We cannot take services away on the one hand and, on the other, say that we want more people to be treated in a community setting. That will ultimately lead to such people ending up in an acute setting. So, we have to radically look at and address how things are currently done, because we cannot achieve the outcome of reducing need and stress on the acute care sector by moving people to the community at the same time as we cut the community sector. Therefore, I

thank the Member for bringing that issue to the Assembly's attention.

Mr McDevitt: Mr Speaker, the Minister told the House that it was time for a generational change and time to challenge the status quo, and you will not find me disagreeing with that statement. However, I will ask the Minister specifically about the role that the private sector may play in the future of our health service. He tells us that economies of scale do not exist at a regional level to deliver proper private sector involvement. However, they would exist on an all-island basis. If we are really up for change, I ask the Minister directly: will he start to look at how the private sector across the island of Ireland can contribute positively to the future of our health service?

Mr Poots: I understand why the Member likes the idea of generational change, but I do not want to get into his SDLP leadership aspirations. He was talking during the statement. Perhaps, had he listened, he would have noted the comments about the opportunities of working outside the Northern Ireland jurisdiction with both the Republic of Ireland and other parts of the UK.

Northern Ireland does not have the scale of population necessary to provide all services. Therefore, it is incumbent on us to look at how we work with others to ensure that quality services are provided. If, for example, we can provide good quality services in the new hospital in Enniskillen in County Fermanagh and those services can be sustained and supported by the Republic of Ireland buying some of them, I will be very happy to look at that, and, indeed, the review will look at that. As I indicated —

Mr McDevitt: Hear, hear. He has seen the light.

Mr Poots: If the Member had been listening to my statement, he would have picked that up.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his statement. How can he ensure that this will not simply be another costly exercise with little delivery, such as those we have seen in the past? Will he tell the House how much is being paid to the chairman and other expert members of the review panel?

Mr Poots: That is a reasonable question. However, the ranting on the sidelines is unreasonable. Let us be frank: the review will set how we do things for the next 10 years, which will include a spend of around £50 billion.

I know that you all think that I am brilliant in the House and that I have so much ability and knowledge myself that I do not need any help or advice. I am sorry to bring you all down a level: I will make mistakes, and I will get it wrong. However, I greatly appreciate the advice and support that I receive in trying to make the right decisions and the right choices. Therefore, asking people who have particular expertise to assist us in doing that is not foolish. There will be some financial cost in having an expert panel of advisers, and we are looking at around £52,000. A £52,000 cost to help us spend £50 billion indicates that there is a reasonable economy of scale if it helps us to make the right choices and right decisions on the way forward.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for his statement. He referred to the importance of the work being carried out at primary care level and the need to use medicine effectively and help people to remain at home and have greater confidence. Do those statements not directly describe the vital services provided by local pharmacies — for example, personal dispensing trays? Will he give an assurance that pharmacists already in position will be taken into consideration as regards the services he is talking about transferring to third-party suppliers, community services and suchlike? We have a very strong, well-educated, well-trained pharmacy team already in place that can help out in any future development.

Mr Poots: I know that the Member is new to the Assembly. Perhaps he was not aware that decisions on pharmacy were made by the previous Minister, a member of his party. That pharmacy decision was challenged by Community Pharmacy NI (CPNI) in April, when it got leave to take a judicial review. When I took up my position, my hands were tied on entering negotiations because there was a judicial review of the decisions made by the previous Minister, who belonged to the Member's party. There is no point in the Member crying over the spilt milk that his Minister left on the floor. When the judicial review is complete, I will have to pick up the pieces and try to ensure that the damage that has been done does not lead to the consequences that the Member has described.

Ms Lewis: I welcome the Minister's statement and the review of health and social care services. Will additional resources be required to implement the review's findings?

Mr Poots: With regard to resources and looking at the review findings, it is important that, as we move forward, we identify how we can make things happen with minimal impact on our resources. We will take account of the resources available in the Budget settlement, and there may be capital and other cost implications to enable the services to be significantly reconfigured. That may involve looking to the private sector for assistance, particularly with the capital budget. We do not have enough in our capital budget to carry out the works that are needed in the health service. It is an area that we need to address strongly. I hope that those issues will be identified in the review report so that we are in a position to action some of those works in the very near future.

Mr Beggs: In his statement, the Minister mentioned the importance of good intermediate care and rehabilitation and community support. Does he recognise that the close involvement of family and friends plays an important part in people's recovery and ultimate discharge and that locating rehabilitation units in the community facilitates the involvement of family and friends, thus enabling early discharge? When, therefore, will we have quality health and care centres in Larne and Carrickfergus?

Mr Poots: The Member should note my comments to Ms Lewis. The set budget will not enable us to build such facilities, even though they would form a key part of challenging the current situation, remove the need for such extensive acute care facilities and bring more care to the primary and intermediate sector. That is why I said that we needed to look to the private sector for help in delivering services, such as primary care clinics, thus enabling us to make a real difference to the quality of people's lives and to the management of conditions that will mean that they avoid having to go into hospital and to ensure that we do things more cost-effectively.

If I may give one example, I had a good conversation with my counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, Dr James Reilly, who indicated that a new diabetes clinic had opened just north of Cork with 1,400 clients. In the past two years, no amputations have taken place. The fact that diabetics are not having amputations is really good news. It means that the condition is being managed better than was the case heretofore. Moreover, that, of course, saves the Government money. Those are the win-wins that we need to

see. Nevertheless, we must never lose focus of the fact that, in that equation, quality of care must come first.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I welcome the review. However, given that the panel will report back to him by 30 November, is it not a bit too hasty to close the A&E department in Belfast City Hospital in the same month that the review is ongoing? Should more effort not be made to keep the A&E department going until the review is completed?

Mr Poots: The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust's decision to close Belfast City Hospital's A&E department temporarily was based on safety and quality of care. I cannot interfere in such decisions. When clinicians say that there are safety issues, it is not the role of politicians to interfere. However, if we are to do things right in future, we need to identify and plan the way forward. We need a situation in which we, as public representatives making decisions that affect the people on behalf of the people, give leadership to ensure that conditions are not such that decisions such as the one made at Belfast City Hospital have to be made. It is regrettable that the number of consultants in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust area is insufficient to man all the trust's hospitals, thus necessitating the bringing together of two services to ensure the consistent availability of senior staff, so that trauma units are not operated continuously, night after night, by junior doctors. What was happening was not acceptable or satisfactory.

Private Members' Business

Rural Businesses

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

12.00 noon

Mr McQuillan: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the importance of rural businesses to the local economy; and calls on the Executive to increase support for rural businesses and, in particular, to permit them to advertise on public roads and to erect directional signage.

The motion is an issue of major importance to my constituents in East Londonderry, where local businesses in a rural environment are the lifeblood of the economy. Not only do they provide a service, they create jobs. Up to 50% of the population of East Londonderry lives in a wholly rural area or a part-rural, part-urban area. The rural economy is, therefore, central to my constituency.

Although the focus of the motion is on road signage, as is noted in the detail, the issue of supporting rural businesses stretches across a number of Departments. The draft rural White Paper published by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) identified five key themes as a means of supporting rural communities. The priority of theme 4, "Sustainable Rural Economies", was:

"To provide rural businesses with appropriate support to ensure the development of dynamic and innovative rural economies".

Although the majority of that theme focuses on the businesses that are associated with farming and identifies the agrifood sector as a major contributor to the local economy, little or nothing is said about local businesses such as small retail outlets. Those types of businesses employ small numbers but are worth a lot to the local community. Only in small rural towns can we see small locally owned shops remaining intact. That includes bakeries, fruit and vegetable shops and independently owned newsagents. In more urban areas, such shops have been taken over by large corporations.

One little improvement that could be made is road signage, which is important to local rural business owners as it provides directions to customers who might be looking for a specific business or who may be passing by conveniently, resulting in unexpected trade. In my experience, the Planning Service has been and is being far too restrictive in preventing local businesses from erecting signs that simply promote their business in some of the most rural areas of Northern Ireland. As business, especially the retail sector, centres on the capital city of Belfast and major towns, owners of small shops have little or no chance of securing that trade. For them, never mind locals, their business is their lifeblood. Their businesses offer not only a service to the local community but employment, which is important, given the harsh economic conditions that we face.

In Northern Ireland, the agency with prime responsibility for controlling advertisements is the Planning Service. Article 4 of the planning regulations states that no advertisement may be displayed without the consent of the Department of the Environment (DOE). However, consent for signage does not apply to advertisements that have "deemed consent" under planning regulations or to advertisements of particular classes, including those:

"(i) announcing any local event or activity of a religious, educational, cultural, charitable, political, social, or recreational character; or

(ii) relating to any temporary matter in connection with an event of local activity of such character;

not being an event or activity promoted or carried on for commercial purposes."

Signage for the purpose of providing direction has been described as follows:

"to guide road users to their desired destinations, via the most appropriate route, at the latter stages of their journey, particularly where destinations may be hard to find."

However, Roads Service deems that road signs for businesses are not to be used as marketing tools. Instead, it insists that directional signs should be used only where they are of benefit to the road user as an aid to navigation or for road safety or traffic management reasons. That presents a major obstacle to local rural businesses. At the moment, the choice between having a road sign and not having a road sign

can be a choice between success and failure for many local business owners.

I am in no way suggesting that the regulations be relaxed to such an extent that the countryside becomes littered with signs advertising businesses, but I am suggesting that they be made flexible enough to assist local businesses in the current economic climate. I do not feel that the Planning Service and the Department of the Environment are being helpful in this matter or are taking that economic climate into consideration.

Given that my constituency lies within reach of some of the most picturesque places here in Ulster, tourism is central to its local economy. Therefore, signage is important, as recognised in a document published jointly by Roads Service and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board in April 2004, 'Tourist Signing in Northern Ireland', which also contains criteria for signs marking attractions. White-on-brown tourist signs constitute one part of the overall family of directional signs.

The main purpose of tourist signs, as for any directional sign, is to guide visitors to their desired destination. White-on-brown signs are deemed to supplement rather than duplicate information already available. It is recognised that, although there are additional benefits for the beneficiary of the white-on-brown signs, they are there to provide clear benefits to the road user. The benefits of white-on-brown signs are clear, for not only the beneficiary but the tourist.

Mr Humphrey: I agree entirely with the Member. I remember lobbying Roads Service a couple of years ago, through my previous employment, on a brown sign relating to a piece of Ulster-Scots art in the tourist town of Bushmills. We could not get Roads Service to move on that. I think that I wrote to the Member's constituency colleague Mr Campbell, who was the Minister at the time. We could not get Roads Service to move. It was clearly something that was going to be of benefit to tourists coming to Northern Ireland, particularly tourists from Scotland, Canada and the United States with an Ulster-Scots background, but Roads Service simply refused. I could not understand it.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Member for his intervention. I totally agree with him: it is very hard to get Roads Service to understand the importance of the signs. I trust that the Minister will pass on what is being said today to her Executive colleagues.

I, therefore, ask whether a similar policy can be drafted to benefit local businesses that may not be directly considered to be a tourist attraction but that will provide a service for local tourists visiting the area. Mr Speaker, I will give you an example. The A29 runs from the Minister's constituency into my constituency and on to the north coast. There is a tea room there called the Duck Pond tea room. I recommend that anybody who is passing go in for a cup of tea and a cupcake. Members know that I would not be interested in a cupcake, but I would have a cup of tea. One day, when the owner had a sign out, Mr Roads Service landed and told the owner that he could not put it out and that he had to bring it in. The consequence of that was that the owner saw his takings reduced to one fifth of what they were on a normal day when he had the sign out. It is important that Roads Service takes action and allows some sort of signage.

I commend the motion to the House and look forward to the debate.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I agree with the Member. For generations, rural businesses have been the backbone of the communities, and they are becoming more and more squeezed out by the global market, and so on. One of the biggest factors in squeezing out rural businesses at the present time is the financial constraints that they face.

The rural development programme was introduced recently. I found that to be a lifeline to small businesses. It allowed existing businesses to expand and new businesses to start up. However, there are two downsides to that. One is the banks. They have still not bought into the whole concept of what is going on — the rejuvenation of the countryside and its communities, which we all see and hear and talk about. The other downside is the Planning Service. I agree with the Member that the Planning Service needs to show a little bit of give and take on signage. That is true. As clearly defined, we have an urban/rural problem here. The problem with signage in urban areas is not as bad as it is in rural areas. Businesses in rural areas are paying the same rates and overheads. Yesterday, we talked here about energy prices. Large amounts of my area have no gas provision. We do not have the choice of gas, regardless of its cost; we have only electricity.

The rural development programme needs to be promoted more. There are two to three years remaining of the programme. The money is there to be put into it, and I do not think that it is being used properly. Part of the Assembly's brief is to help rural businesses. I ask the Assembly to talk to the banks and allow them to be more flexible. There is a period of six weeks from when an applicant is accepted for the programme until he buys the material, for instance. In that period, the applicant has to arrange a bridging loan and take big money out of the bank. If the banks are not willing to move, we should be looking at other financial institutions that could help those people. The rural development programme assists the farming industry, because it has helped farmers to go into businesses outside farming to supplement their income. However, they also meet planning constraints.

The second element I want to talk about is the Housing Executive. It employs a lot of people, and it has a big say in rural areas. One of its areas of work is its grant schemes; for example, its disability grant scheme. Under that scheme, it can take between one and two years from an application being made to a person being told to start the work, and that is happening year-on-year. If that scheme could be fast-tracked in some way, it would allow more builders in rural areas to get the work and enable them to put more money back into the economy. However, that is not happening at the moment.

The councils, through the economic strategies they roll out in their council areas and their tourism strategies, also have a big role to play. The Tourist Board talks to the councils before tourism strategies come out; they liaise with each other. The councils also have a role to play in regard to signage, which the Member talked about earlier. They can do that, and we should encourage them to do more in that area. The Tourist Board spent almost £750,000 on brown signage along the previous Antrim Coast Road — it is now the Causeway coastal route — which is good for tourism. However, the drivers for tourism are the small businesses such as souvenir shops, cafes, public houses and hotels. We will end up with those businesses being able to operate only during the summer and having to close in the winter, and those communities will die. We are all about rejuvenating communities, but we cannot do that with what we have at the moment.

The catalyst for driving the rural economy is the draft Rural White Paper, which was introduced by the previous Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Michelle Gildernew, and which the present Minister, Michelle O'Neill, will hopefully sign off before the end of the year.

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

Mr McMullan: Members, everything that you need is in that document, such as the drivers and the names of the people and organisations. I encourage the Assembly to use the Rural White Paper as the driver for rejuvenating rural areas.

Mr Nesbitt: Mr Speaker, I welcome the opportunity to discuss the motion, and, with your permission, I will dwell primarily on its first clause, which is:

"That this Assembly recognises the importance of rural businesses to the local economy;".

On the issue of signage, I was interested to hear Mr Campbell on 'Good Morning Ulster' on BBC Radio Ulster this morning discussing how he felt that signage would be useful to people with maps and satnavs. My satnav directs me to the premises rather than to the sign for the premises, but, given where Mr Campbell is sitting, perhaps he supports inferior brands to me. *[Laughter.]*

I want to highlight another programme on BBC radio. BBC Radio 4's 'The Food Programme' made, by its own admission, a rare visit to Northern Ireland a few months ago to examine the role of our local food entrepreneurs in boosting the private sector. Indeed, the programme identified Northern Ireland as the leading region of the United Kingdom in that regard. I am happy to say that two of the interviewees were constituents of mine: Martin Hamilton of Mash Direct outside Comber, who is exporting his vegetables to the United States; and Will Taylor of Glastry Farm Ice Cream at Kircubbin, who has exclusive rights to some of London's top international five-star hotels.

Of course, the rural economy has more to do with the economy than just agriculture, and it is important that, as we try to regrow the private sector, we choose our sectors and do so mindful of the demographics and what they have to offer. Previously in the House, I spoke of the benefit of creating a green economic corridor from Belfast Harbour all the way down the

Ards peninsula, based on the fact that Belfast Harbour is investing some £50 million in a new logistics facility for offshore wind. From that, flows the possibility of agglomeration economics with spin-out and spin-off companies being established in rural sites from Belfast Harbour to Portaferry.

In his report to the House earlier on his visit to the United States, the First Minister referred to HBO and its filming of 'Game of Thrones' which takes place not only in the Paint Hall Studio in the Titanic Quarter but at four satellite filming venues across Northern Ireland. Clearly, that happens with or without appropriate signage.

12.15 pm

I accept that signage is important to the tourism industry. Tourism tends to make its money in the rural economy, with the exceptions of the Titanic Quarter and perhaps the City of Culture, Derry/Londonderry in 2013. I think of the Giant's Causeway and golf, particularly at Portrush, Newcastle and now Holywood, thanks to Rory McIlroy. There is also St Patrick's trail and our Ulster-Scots heritage, which need to be well signposted, whether physically or on satnav and associated software programs.

Signage plays a role, but a limited one, in promoting the rural economy. We need to address the generic weaknesses that stem from a lack of critical mass in people and infrastructure. On this morning's 'Good Morning Ulster', we heard a report on the lack of affordable child-minding for people in both urban and rural settings. An enhanced role for the social economy will release the potential of the rural economy to help our economy and people move forward. We often talk of the social economy as the not-for-profit sector. I see it somewhat differently: as something that generates profit, not in pounds and pence, but in individual and community development.

I am very happy to support the motion, although I see the irony of Mr Campbell and Mr McQuillan bringing it forward on a day when one of their colleagues, a Mr Alan Graham, had the most fantastic physical advertisement on his farmland outside Bangor, in the pop icon Rihanna, and yet did not seem to welcome her presence. Perhaps we might rethink and reconsider, moving forward.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Members who tabled the motion. Both represent the same constituency, and we have some understanding of the particular

problems that small businesses have there. I am sure that the struggle that small businesses have in East Derry is replicated across the North. I suggest, however, that, although directional signs are useful, the Assembly needs to do a lot more to sustain small businesses, which are frequently described as the lifeblood of the community.

How can we do that? I think we must all have been listening to the radio this morning. I heard the commentary on how schools should change, and particularly on how greater entrepreneurship should be built into the school curriculum. As we go down the path of reforming the education system, that element needs to be addressed. That said, I recognise the work of Young Enterprise and other groups such as The Prince's Trust, which have been around for a long time. However, those projects are not built into the main curriculum, and they should be.

Mr Speaker, you know that one of the biggest obstacles to setting up your own business is red tape. There is scope for Limavady and Coleraine councils to collaborate to address red tape. I suggest that businesses should be exempt from registration for VAT for their first 12 months. There is much that local councils are doing to support businesses, but it could be done much more strategically and I urge that they take such an approach. In Coleraine and Limavady, small shops are the lifeblood of the local community, and it is ironic that, tomorrow night, there is a public meeting to discuss the problem of rates. Rates bills fall very unfairly on many small businesses that simply cannot afford to meet the demands. In Coleraine, we look forward to the Finance Minister, Mr Sammy Wilson, spelling out how there could be greater help for small businesses that have closed or are at a critical stage where they need help.

Directional signs, yes, but in what direction are we pointing our small businesses? That is key to the future. That is in no way to deride the motion. The motion is very important, and I am grateful that it has been proposed. However, we need to be clear, focused and supportive about where we are going. It is no longer enough simply to be champions who ask for nothing more than a level playing field. Any small business will tell you that everything is stacked in favour of big business. I do not think the future of the small business is a hopeless case, and I hope and pray that we do not get into a situation, as has happened

in many towns, villages and rural communities in England, where the small businesses have simply disappeared. Essentially, we are a rural community, and even our larger towns are rural in nature, and we have to put everything we can into those places.

When the debate is carefully analysed by those who have influence, they will take seriously what has been said this morning. I encourage our Ministers to work in partnership a lot more. I remember when the Seagate factory closed in Limavady, our Ministers all arrived independently in their own cars, but that is not how to solve the problem. Our Ministers should sit around the table together in true partnership and encourage special task forces to identify the issues and address them. That should be done in collaboration with the university, the chambers of commerce and our councils, which, I believe, are doing a good job but should be encouraged to do more.

Mr Lunn: I am afraid that I have been asked to contribute to this debate at very short notice, so forgive me if I ramble a bit.

Mr Nesbitt: As usual.

Mr Lunn: Yes, as usual.

The motion seems to be aimed at more than one Department. I have listed the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) for tourism, DARD because the Minister is here, the Department for Regional Development (DRD) because of the eternal problem over signs being hung on lamp posts, and DOE because of planning issues. I am not sure which Minister this motion should be aimed at, but we have no problem supporting it. Rural businesses suffer the same problems as non-rural businesses, but more is heaped upon them because of their isolation, their broadband difficulties, which we are going to hear about later, transport costs, which Mr Dallat referred to, rates, lack of support and lack of cohesion.

A particular problem in rural areas is that people cannot even find the business that they are looking for, and that leads to the issue of directional signs. We support the motion as it is phrased, subject to some fairly stiff caveats about the nature, size and type of signage, which leads me to advertising.

We have all seen the proliferation of advertising signs on the wheeled things that people put

in fields. Apparently, they are not illegal at the moment, but they are just as unsightly as something that might be placed beside the road. In the past few years, a company in Lisburn — I will not name it but it specialises in wooden floors — has managed to erect signage on just about every conceivable place known to man. Every time you stop your car, you see a sign for the company. The signs are on fences, barriers, roadsides and advertising hoardings. I am sure that some of the signs are illegal and some are not, but that company seems to get away with it. However, my colleague was telling me about a case, presumably in Strangford, of a small fish and chip shop, which decided to advertise when it opened up, and it put up a total of seven signs on lamp posts somewhere in the Strangford constituency —

Mr McCarthy: The village of Cloughey.

Mr Lunn: Thank you, Kieran.

The DRD demanded that the signs be taken down because they were on lampposts. Also, the Department did not give the shop any warning and fined it £350; £50 for each sign. So, that is a good example of support being given to a small rural business that was trying to establish itself.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: Yes; thankfully.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I am sure that the number of fish and chip shops in a small village such as Cloughey is limited.

There is an example in my constituency where a sign for a guest house in Downpatrick was permitted to be displayed in one direction but not the other. I hope that this is the type of problem that the Members who tabled the motion are trying to deal with; in other words, how we co-ordinate the appropriate use of signage.

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

Mr Lunn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I note that, in some places around the world, that sort of signage is allowed in a limited way and there are rules that allow two signs within a quarter mile of a business and two more within a mile radius. You hear about that kind of thing happening.

When I go round the country, I see perfectly legitimate signage, mostly for more substantial businesses and churches. I have seen directional road signs, below which there are other signs that read, "Leading to" such and such a premises or church. I have also seen signs that look like low street signs, established for just one business. So, there is scope. However, our concern is that, without any control over the size, colour and position of signs, there will be proliferation of them, which really would not do the image of the countryside any good at all.

The only other thing that I have to say on the matter is that it is ironic that the DRD was so quick to demand that signage advertising a business be taken down — and actually threw in a fine to make its point — when just above the sign there were illegal flags that nobody can take down, evidently, and that nobody will ever be fined over. There is a contrast there.

We are looking for consistency and a set of rules that everyone can understand. We want small rural businesses to have every opportunity to be able to advertise their wares in a legitimate and reasonable way so that people can find their way to the premises. When I have driven along the A5 over the past few years, I have noticed that there are about 200 signs stuck into the grass, some of which advocate a new road and others which advocate against it, and I do not think that they do the area's image much good. We need consistency and a good set of rules that people can understand.

Mr Wells: Every rural MLA supports the motion. We all understand that rural businesses, like the general economy, are suffering. However, there are things that the Assembly as a whole can do. I think that we are talking about the Executive rather than one particular Minister, because the motion is cross-cutting and takes in, for instance, DARD, the DOE, DETI and, of course, the DRD, and requires a joined-up approach to meet the needs of rural businesses.

One thing that can be done immediately to assist rural businesses is to ensure that every small business in Northern Ireland has an adequate broadband connection. There is no doubt that that is the way forward for many of our businesses. It is amazing how the internet has transformed every aspect of life in Northern Ireland. However, I get constant complaints from small businesses in south Down about the fact that they cannot grow and attract orders. As far as they are concerned, the worldwide web has

become the worldwide wait, because they have to sit for ages for orders to come through. So, I think that that is a very practical thing that can be done.

I have also noticed that there is a lack of business park spaces for small businesses in rural areas in my constituency. Companies that wish to establish themselves in large conurbations are very well provided for and get multiple offers to use large warehouses and ready built off-the-peg premises. However, when you go to small villages — we want to encourage people to establish businesses that employ maybe only two or three people — you see that there is a shortage of suitably serviced workspaces for them. That is another very practical thing that could be done.

The issue of signage is difficult. One of Northern Ireland's greatest assets is, of course, its very attractive countryside. However, if truth be told, we have trashed the countryside in many parts of Northern Ireland. I drove through west Tyrone recently, and I was absolutely appalled.

An area that I knew well 20 or 30 years ago was completely destroyed by inappropriate development and mass proliferation of ugly bungalows and houses on almost every hilltop, which detracts enormously from the quality of that countryside. That is why it is so important to bring in new policies to prevent that from happening. On top of that, there are ghastly signs for rural businesses. The problem is that for 90% of those signs, no form of consent has been given. It is simply the case that businesses feel that it is necessary to put up the largest possible sign. I have seen signs that are probably bigger than the businesses that they advertise.

12.30 pm

We understand the problems that local rural businesses have. They want to advertise the availability of their goods and services. We need to consider some form of standardisation of signs in the same way that we tackled the issue for guest houses and bed and breakfast accommodation. There was a demand from those small businesses to advertise their presence for passing trade. However, rather than to allow every business to come up with the most garish and biggest possible sign that it could imagine, we said that that is not the way that we will do it; we will design a standard sign that can be used by all small businesses to advertise their presence. That is what we need

to do in order to facilitate the multitude of local small businesses, such as joineries and those that create products using concrete, wood and timber. There needs to be a standard sign that enables those businesses to be found but that does not detract from the countryside.

“Let us kick the planners” seems to be a theme in the Assembly. However, if Planning Service actually got down to it and enforced the removal of every unauthorised sign in Northern Ireland, there would be thousands and thousands of cases. Quite often, I watch the planning schedule going through Down District Council. Once in a blue moon, one sees an application for consent to advertise in a rural area. That is not what happens: businesses simply go ahead and do it. Would it not be better to regulate that and have signs that people can see and appreciate?

To return to those who would kick the planners; most rural businesses in Northern Ireland do not have planning permission. What has happened is that some local entrepreneur has decided that he has a skill in woodturning or with precast concrete, for example, and he has decided to develop that business in a garage or a back shed. The business has grown, and he has been successful. It has continued to expand. Eventually, it is discovered that it has been there for four years and that, therefore, no action can be taken against it. That is not the way to plan rural businesses.

I am glad that the policy that controls businesses in rural communities has been changed recently to be more flexible and permissive. Therefore, there are ways in which people can actually regulate their situation and obtain planning permission. Things are moving forward. The Planning Service is taking strong action on that issue, but, yes, an awful lot still needs to be done. During the current recession, the Assembly must retain support for and nurture small businesses because they are the backbone of the rural community. The Assembly must do all that it can to sustain them.

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

The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when the next item of business will be Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.33 pm.

On resuming (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Basil McCrea is not in his place for question 1.

Woodland

2. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she will support higher woodland creation targets in the Executive's Programme for Government. (AQO 398/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to see higher targets for woodland creation. Forest Service's business plan for 2011-12 identifies a target of 200 hectares of new woodland creation, which is realistic and achievable. That reflects the recent uptake of woodland creation grants by landowners and is affordable, given capital budgetary constraints.

If we are to achieve higher targets, we need and I am committed to developing new mechanisms to support woodland creation in recognition that higher levels of planting will be required in future to achieve our long-term aim of increasing woodland cover from 6% to 12% of the entire land area over the next 50 years. This year, I intend to review the operation of the existing scheme and the effectiveness of the strategy and the associated business plan targets.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her answer. It is disappointing. I understand that her officials are proposing lower targets for next year, compared with the targets for the previous three years. Can the Minister confirm that?

Mrs O'Neill: I would like to confirm to the Member that I am also disappointed at not being able to reach certain targets. I intend to review the whole process — the grants scheme and everything that is involved — so that we can make sure that we attract as many people as possible into this.

The other key factor that is discouraging some people from getting involved is the whole issue of CAP reform and uncertainty about the type of land that will be eligible under the new system. People are being reserved; they are sitting back and waiting to see the proposals from Europe before they decide to get involved in some of our schemes.

Those are all factors, but, as I said, I want to keep the process under constant review to make sure that the targets that we have are realistic and achievable. We are fully committed to increasing woodland cover from 6% to 12% over that 50-year period. So, it is about making sure that our targets are realistic and achievable.

Mrs Dobson: Over the past three years, Forest Service has failed to deliver 54% of its target for new woodland creation. Can the Minister detail how she intends to combat that shortfall and improve on our extremely low 6% woodland coverage, which compares poorly with the EU average of 33%?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her question. I addressed that in my previous answer. I am also disappointed at the targets; we have to keep them under continual review. I have said to Forest Service that, by the end of the year, I want a full review to look at what we have done and where we expect to be so that we can put measures in place.

We have two grants schemes in the Department, and we are looking at a woodland inventory to establish exactly what we have. I do not disagree with you: I am disappointed about the targets, but I will make sure that we move forward in a positive manner and do whatever we can through grant support and grant aid, even for farmers who wish to diversify and plant more trees.

Mr W Clarke: Will the Minister provide details of any plans that she might have to strengthen North/South links in forestry?

Mrs O'Neill: I am pleased to confirm that Forest Service in the North and Coillte in the South co-operate on many aspects of forestry. In order to formalise and develop those relations still further, a memorandum of understanding between the two organisations was launched on 22 March 2011. That will help to maximise the potential for development of the forestry sector on an all-island basis, including socio-economic benefits, while protecting the environment. Forest

Service staff in the North are also in regular contact with their forest service colleagues in the South about forestry plant health matters.

DARD: Headquarters

3. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the progress made on the decentralisation of her Department's headquarters. (AQO 399/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am pleased to confirm that the DARD HQ relocation programme began in earnest in March 2011. A project team established by the DARD permanent secretary as a committee of the departmental board has met on four occasions and agreed a scoping paper which outlines the considerations necessary to progress the programme. That paper covers issues such as policy context, project management, equality screening and human resource issues.

Since taking up post, I have been keen to ensure continued progress in this important programme. I have already agreed a necessary governance structure for the programme, and the formal programme board is now in place to progress and plan the work necessary to ensure that we have successful delivery. The recently appointed programme manager is already working on the development of the strategic outline case, which is a necessary component for a programme of that scale. The programme will be subject to the Executive's usual requirements in respect of business cases and procurement. In moving forward with the programme, DARD will continue to work closely with all key stakeholders. It is my intention to submit a paper on the DARD HQ relocation programme to Executive colleagues before Christmas.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she outline the economic benefits of moving the DARD headquarters out of Belfast?

Mrs O'Neill: I am delighted to have the opportunity to highlight the economic benefits. The proposed relocation of the headquarters out of the greater Belfast area has its origins, as the Member will know, in the Bain report on the relocation of public sector jobs. As intimated in the Bain report, a move to a rural location will have significant economic and social benefits. Those will be fully articulated in the business case that will be developed and presented to the Executive as part of the relocation project.

It is very clear that the proposed relocation will naturally stimulate the rural economy through increased local spend and the provision of high-quality and well-paid public sector jobs. There are, potentially, also the jobs associated with any construction project that would come about as a result of the relocation. It will also help to share wealth across the economy and contribute to better-balanced economic growth by commencing to address disparities in the distribution of public sector jobs across the North of Ireland. Furthermore, the proposed DARD headquarters relocation represents an important first step to relocate a significant share of public sector jobs and could pave the way for a much larger programme of relocation in the public sector. It would naturally greatly enhance the economic and social development of rural communities and bring a greater realisation of the outcomes envisaged by Bain.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister will not be surprised when I refer to Loughry in my constituency — indeed, the constituency that we share — which is a good example of an area that would suit and be more than able to facilitate the new headquarters. Will the Minister assure the House and the people of the Cookstown and mid-Ulster area that she will consider that as a potential site?

Mrs O'Neill: It would be opportunistic of me to stand up and plump for Mid Ulster, but obviously, as constituency representatives, everybody has an interest. No location has been decided for the DARD HQ. What I will do in line with the Bain report is say that I am clearly committed to making sure the location comes out of the greater Belfast area. The details of the configuration are yet to be determined. Those and many other matters will have to form part of the business case, which I intend to bring to the Executive later this year.

Mr Byrne: I welcome what the Minister has said so far about office accommodation needs. Will she assure the House that no undue or particular barriers will be put in place by accommodation office officials that might jeopardise provincial towns and office projects beyond the 20-mile radius of Belfast?

Mrs O'Neill: I am not sure that I understood the question, but I am not interested in disadvantaging anybody. The project is about moving high-quality public sector jobs into a rural community. That is something I am very committed to. The

fact that people will be able to access public sector jobs outside the Belfast area can only be an advantage to those who live in rural communities and who, for too long, have had to travel to Belfast to get a job in the first place and even to try to achieve promotion in the Civil Service. We should all welcome this. It will be a positive development, and, hopefully, other Departments will follow suit.

Mr Nesbitt: I shall just pursue Mr Boylan's question, Minister. I am, first of all, very pleased that Strangford and the Ards peninsula are still in the hunt to be the location, should your Department move. However, will you clarify how a move would help you to achieve any PSAs or key targets that you might set yourself under the new Programme for Government?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member is only new to the Assembly, so he may not be aware of the Bain report and other reports that clearly suggest that the Government need to look at the decentralisation of public sector jobs. This very much meets those targets and works towards those aims. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.

Mrs O'Neill: There is an Executive commitment to decentralise public sector jobs. I hope to take this project forward and to complete it by the end of 2015. We have set aside £13 million in this Budget period, and £13 million will hopefully be achieved in the next Budget period. I will not be deterred from the job at hand. It is a fantastic opportunity to bring public sector jobs into a rural area. There are not too many Members who would not support that measure.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I should have announced that question 6 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer and that question 12 has been transferred to DRD for a written answer. Paul Girvan is not in his place to ask question 4.

Veterinary Medicine

5. **Mr Murphy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the decision to freeze tuition fees, what action can be taken to assist students who want to study veterinary medicine as there are currently no courses available locally. (AQO 401/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My Department and the agrifood sector have a clear and ongoing need for trained veterinary professionals. Recently, I met representatives of the North of Ireland Veterinary Association and the British Veterinary Association and listened to their concerns about the consequences of high tuition fees for students who wish to study veterinary medicine. It is an issue, of course, that affects more than veterinary students. I have considerable personal sympathy with the challenges that future students will face.

I acknowledge that there are no veterinary medicine courses available locally, but they are available in Dublin and at seven universities in Britain. Institutions in Britain that charge higher fees will offer bursaries to students from low-income backgrounds as part of their access arrangements. Students from the North will also be able to avail themselves of the means-tested support arrangements offered by DEL if they are from lower-income households. I understand that no tuition fees are chargeable to those who wish to study in Dublin, although there is a registration fee, which is reimbursed by DEL.

I have already relayed the concerns expressed to me by the professional veterinary bodies to the Minister for Employment and Learning, and I intend to meet him to seek an assurance that he will keep the issue under review. In the meantime, I have reviewed the supply of veterinary professionals locally and am satisfied that there is no current or emerging risk.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. Obviously, this issue is a bit of an anomaly resulting from the very welcome decision that the Executive took on tuition fees. I am pleased to learn that there are courses available on the island and that there is no additional charge for people travelling down to Dublin from the North.

Involvement in the veterinary industry is a matter of supply and demand. Will the Minister give an assessment of the supply of veterinary professionals locally?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. DARD's primary interest is in the availability of veterinary professionals to meet the requirements of the local agrifood industry and DARD. You will appreciate that there is an important distinction between that requirement and the much wider issue of enabling students

from the North to attend veterinary courses or any other courses in Britain.

The availability of veterinary surgeons and other trends in the veterinary profession is regularly surveyed by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, which publishes the reports on its website. The most recent survey does not indicate any impending shortfall in the number of veterinary surgeons, nor has the Department identified any such difficulties in the North. Furthermore, research on forecasting future skills needs in the North that was undertaken by DEL in 2009 shows that the supply of veterinary science graduates is projected to meet the indicative graduate requirement until 2020. Supply will meet the projected demand.

There is no evidence of an immediate or foreseeable risk to the supply of veterinary professionals in the North of Ireland. The royal college's regular monitoring of the position will provide an early warning if any such risk emerges. There is no departmental requirement for DARD to pursue specific actions at this stage. Indeed, that could be counterproductive. However, I will continue to keep the position under review. I will continue to work closely with the royal college and to ensure that we are fit for purpose and can meet our targets.

Mr Frew: Has the Minister looked at her budget in respect of the freeze in tuition fees? Where will the shortfall in her budget be made up from? Will she remind the House exactly how much DARD has lost?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. As the scrutiny Committee is involved in scrutinising the DARD budget, I am sure that the Member is aware that it is very difficult for all Departments. We have to meet particular challenges, but we are trying to meet our efficiency savings through back room costs and other things that do not impact our farmers directly. I can provide a more detailed breakdown if the Member needs it.

2.15 pm

We in DARD have to look at the issue of tuition fees. Our tuition fees are different because our colleges are different. We were delighted that we did not have to increase charges in this Budget period except by the current inflation rate. That is the position for the 2011-12 period, and, given the budgetary discussions, we will keep that under review over the next year.

Another issue that has been raised is that of students coming from Britain and elsewhere and whether they would displace some of our students. We will have to review that situation because the displacement of any of our local students would not be in anyone's interest.

Mrs Overend: I welcome the Minister's engagement with local veterinary associations to discuss this matter. Can she give the House an estimate of the potential learner uptake if veterinary medicine courses were offered locally? Does she have figures detailing the number of people from Northern Ireland who have travelled to other parts of the UK to study veterinary science over, say, the past five years?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have those figures in my briefing today, but I am happy to provide them. The veterinary associations with which I have been speaking have told me that quite a number of students travel every year. We are meeting our supply and demand needs for veterinary surgeons. I am meeting those associations again over the next months and will raise that issue with them. There do not seem to be any problems at this stage, but I am happy to provide the Member with details of the number of students who travel to Britain or elsewhere to achieve their veterinary qualifications.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 6 has been withdrawn.

DARD Direct

7. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she will carry out a review of the DARD Direct project before any decisions on new departmental headquarters are taken. (AQO 403/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The relocation of the DARD headquarters is a separate issue and is not dependent on a review of the DARD Direct project. The relocation programme will follow the required approval and appraisal processes, as I outlined in answer to an earlier question, and any potential impact on the DARD Direct project or any DARD Direct office will be considered as part of the overarching business case.

The DARD Direct programme is concerned with delivering our services more efficiently to farm businesses. A business case for this programme was completed in 2008 and was followed by an EQIA public consultation in 2009. To

date, DARD Direct has been rolled out to seven locations: Enniskillen, Coleraine, Downpatrick, Dungannon, Magherafelt, Mallusk and Newry. That leaves five locations to be taken forward over the next 18 months. We will complete a post-project evaluation (PPE) once that has been achieved.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for her reply, but would it not have been better to carry out a review of DARD Direct, if that is the model that she would like to pursue, to examine whether the delivery of DARD services through that model could be improved, rather than spending so many millions on relocating?

Mrs O'Neill: I am sure that the Member is aware that none of the DARD Direct offices would be big enough to house all the departmental staff. For a project of the size of the DARD relocation, we have to follow the Executive's procedures for business cases, approvals and appraisals, so the decision on what arrangements would best meet the needs of any future DARD headquarters need to be considered in the round.

The DARD Direct offices do a fantastic job in the locations that I mentioned. I have had the opportunity to visit some of those offices. They are a one-stop shop for farmers, who have told me about the advantages, and I do not want to take anything away from that. You mentioned a review of DARD Direct even though it was established only in 2008. I hope to have the list of areas that I have outlined completed in the next 18 months. I am happy to keep everything under review; we can always improve and do things better. You can learn only from experience and time. I hope that answers the Member's question.

Mr Campbell: Deputy Speaker, I am glad that you saw me at the third time of asking.

The Minister outlined the issue of five outstanding offices under DARD Direct and said it would be around 18 months before the deal was complete. Does she foresee the fifth of the five offices outstanding not being completed until 18 months hence, or will it be completed before then?

Mrs O'Neill: My intention is that the five areas that I have outlined will be completed in the next 18 months. Some of the problems to date have been around getting premises and negotiations with landlords. Officials are working at that constantly, and we are trying to bring those forward as quickly as possible because

we can see the benefits that are being afforded to farmers in all the different areas. A number of issues have to be ironed out. If it is done in six months, that will be fantastic, but I am setting a target that they should all be completed within 18 months.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member to ask a question, I will explain to Mr Campbell that I called two members of his party. It is tradition that we do not call two members of the same party on a particular question, but we did call two members of the same party for that question. No one was ignored.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's answer, but I also observe that the question is like comparing spuds with apples. The DARD Direct project is a great project and has been very successful where we have had it, but it is hugely important that we get moving on the departmental headquarters. Minister, do you know when the move out of Belfast is likely to be?

Mrs O'Neill: We have a proposed completion date of 2015-16, so we hope, now that we have the project team established, that everything is moving forward. I have to continuously push that matter forward, because it is my intention to officially open the office somewhere in a rural community by 2015-16.

Rivers

8. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the criteria that the Drainage Council and Rivers Agency use to designate rivers for maintenance. (AQO 404/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Designation is required to enable the Department to undertake maintenance and schemes for drainage and flood defence purposes at public expense. Criteria for the designation of watercourses are used objectively by the Drainage Council to ensure uniform treatment across the North. There are two key overriding conditions: first, that the proposed works offer value for money, with benefits outweighing the costs; and, secondly, that the works have sufficient priority to be included in the Rivers Agency's programme.

There are five additional criteria beneath the two overriding conditions, with an application for designation needing to satisfy one or more of the following: first, that there is sufficient

area of disadvantaged agricultural land that is subject to poor drainage or flooding; secondly, that works to reduce existing or potential flooding are outside the capability of the riparians to organise and carry out at their own expense; thirdly, where works are required but it is not possible to identify the occupier; fourthly, where the watercourse requires works, but it does not perform any function connected with the drainage of riparian land; and, lastly, that works are required to provide an outfall for increased run-off from new housing and commercial development.

In summary, designation will be made only for drainage and flood defence purposes where value for money can be demonstrated and works have sufficient priority to be included in the Rivers Agency programme, given the competing priorities that we have for any available funding.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Minister for her answer. It is useful to get some of that information, especially on the criteria. There is a river in my constituency, and local residents are being subjected to smells, trees are overgrown, and there are vermin coming out of the river. Nobody wants to take ownership of it. Should ownership not be part of the criteria? Is any liaison being undertaken by other Departments and the Rivers Agency so that we can talk to someone without being pushed from pillar to post and from one agency to another?

Mrs O'Neill: Thanks for that question. I have every sympathy for the residents, and I have dealt with similar cases in my constituency, where people have experienced problems such as those that you have outlined. It is important to stress that the work of the Rivers Agency and the determinations of the Drainage Council are concerned solely with drainage and flood defence issues. The Rivers Agency has no power over any issues other than flooding or drainage. Where a watercourse is designated and maintenance works are subsequently undertaken at public expense, it will only be because of drainage and flood defence risks.

The work that the Rivers Agency does with other Departments is normally limited to the environmental impact of the potential designation that we are looking at. That is the focus of any cross-departmental work that we do in that field.

Mr Kinahan: I am particularly interested in the liaison between agencies, which was mentioned in the previous supplementary question. However,

when it comes to the maintenance of rivers, is the Department taking proper notice of the river rights of fishermen who, in many cases, have spent large sums of money on a river and are not consulted before maintenance? Is the Department taking proper cognisance and talking to those fishermen before undertaking maintenance work?

Mrs O'Neill: My Department is responsible for fisheries, and it works closely with DCAL, which has ultimate responsibility for inland fisheries. We are always mindful of the rights of fishermen. If there are particular problems of which you are aware, I will be happy to take those on board and deal with them through my Department or through DCAL.

Mr Buchanan: Given that we are facing projected 100-year flood level figures, does the Minister feel that the criteria need to be reviewed? When were the criteria last reviewed, and does she feel that there is merit in initiating a review?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. As I said, I am always happy to keep everything under review. I do not have the information to hand about the date of the most recent review, but I am happy to provide it to the Member in writing after Question Time.

Mrs McKeivitt: Does the Minister have any plans to review the legislation governing the Drainage Council and the Rivers Agency?

Mrs O'Neill: The Drainage Council is always under review, given that it is an unelected body. At the moment, I do not intend to review that legislation, but, if that situation changes, I will be happy to let the Member know.

Rural Poverty

9. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline what her Department can do to address rural poverty.
(AQO 405/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am delighted to answer the question, because addressing rural poverty is a key departmental priority. Some £16 million has been allocated to addressing poverty and social exclusion in rural areas in the current Budget period. My officials are developing measures to tackle rural poverty and are engaging with stakeholders and other Departments to bring

forward initiatives that will help those suffering rural poverty and social isolation.

Some of those measures will build on the successful rural poverty work undertaken by my predecessor, Michelle Gildernew, on access to benefits and services, rural transport and support services to vulnerable groups in rural communities such as elderly people and isolated young people. Those initiatives are having a positive impact on our rural communities, and I hope to build on that in the new term. Through the maximising access to services and benefits and grants for rural dwellers projects, 4,135 vulnerable rural households were visited, and 10,900 referrals to various Departments and agencies for further support were identified. Those actions will directly help those in poverty to secure a better standard of living.

By collaborating with the Department for Social Development (DSD) and NIE, my Department has been able to target fuel poverty. Around 1,000 homes in rural areas have received home energy efficiency measures such as insulation and new central heating systems. I am also keen to address social isolation, which goes hand in hand with poverty. The assisted rural travel scheme has supported almost 150,000 trips made by elderly or disabled people through the rural community transport partnerships. That has had a real impact on targeting social isolation among the most vulnerable in our society. Without that, some people would never get out of the house unless they have someone to call on them, which, obviously, is not the case for everyone.

Nonetheless, addressing poverty goes beyond that £16 million package. Although my Department cannot single-handedly solve all the challenges facing our rural communities, we must ensure that we target our limited resources to produce the maximum benefit. The EU rural development programme and the annual single farm payments also make a significant contribution to the rural economy and help to address the many challenges facing people in rural communities.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister's time is up.

Mr Lynch: Thank you, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her detailed answer. *[Laughter.]* What is the timetable for delivering rural poverty action?

Mrs O'Neill: I will be brief this time. We are reviewing all the anti-poverty measures that my predecessor introduced in the previous term. We are having a number of pre-consultation events, because we want to look at and build on our successes and achievements to date and the new initiatives that we can bring forward.

2.30 pm

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Confucius Institute

1. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she intends to support the newly established Northern Ireland Confucius Institute in its aim to develop Chinese language, particularly within primary and post-primary schools.
(AQO 411/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): I thank the Member for his question. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's primary responsibility for languages relates to the North's indigenous minority languages, which are Irish and Ulster Scots. I recognise the work of the Confucius Institute and its aim to develop the Chinese language, but my Department has no remit in respect of the protection and promotion of that language.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for her response. Considering the importance of the Chinese language as an essential global and business skill, will the Minister encourage the teaching of the Chinese language as a priority language in our schools and colleges? Of course, that includes the idea that you cannot understand the language without understanding the culture.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his response. I cannot impose anything on the Department of Education or the Department for Employment and Learning. There is a misconception that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) is responsible for every language. I recognise the work of the institute in Coleraine. Other Departments have implemented diversity measures, but all that I can do is take on board what the Member has said. I cannot give a commitment to prioritise the Chinese language.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Gregory Campbell.

Mr Nesbitt: There he is.

Mr Campbell: I will come to that afterwards.

I am sure that the Minister is aware of the recent visit to the House by people forwarding the Confucius Institute. They were very well received by a number of us, including the deputy First Minister, junior Ministers and others. Will she co-ordinate with the Department for Employment and Learning to ensure that, when the institute gets up and running properly, particularly at the Coleraine campus, the maximum usage possible from Northern Ireland goes across to China to benefit students here as well as overseas?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am happy to meet Mr Farry to talk about that, but I will not give a guarantee at this stage about co-ordinating that initiative. I am happy to play my part in development, but, other than that, I cannot give any commitments.

Ms Lo: I congratulate the University of Ulster on establishing the Confucius Institute, which is really a worldwide network across something like 55 countries. Will the Minister consider using the opportunities from the institute to have artistic and cultural exchanges with China? Teaching Chinese is not the only purpose of the institute.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I appreciate that. That is where DCAL can benefit from the experience of the institute. I received presentations yesterday from NICEM and ArtsEkta, and they spoke about celebrating our diversity and all cultures. This is an opportunity for DCAL to learn lessons from people who have done that so well.

Mr Nesbitt: Minister, given the Executive's desire to put the economy at the centre of the Programme for Government and the consequent need for cross-cutting measures, will you adopt the Confucius Institute as a departmental flagship and afford it the same support as you are providing to the Líofoa project?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is actually pronounced "Leefa", but I cannot — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I genuinely appreciate your attempt. I cannot give the institute priority at this stage, but I understand the Executive's commitment to supporting and growing the economy. The institute has a valuable role to play in that regard, and, in turn, we have a valuable experience to learn from the institute.

Where we can join up work, we should do so. At this stage, I am not sure and I cannot give a commitment about exactly what role my Department will have. I will certainly ask about that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 6 and 9 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

World Police and Fire Games

2. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline preparations for the 2013 World Police and Fire Games. (AQO 412/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The World Police and Fire Games will be the biggest sporting event ever hosted in Belfast. It will attract in the region of 10,000 competitors supported by at least 15,000 family members and friends from approximately 60 countries. It is estimated that the economic benefit to the North will be in the region of £15.5 million, but that is a fairly conservative estimate that does not take into account that visitors will return to the North. Additionally, the games will bring the benefit of having a positive impact on sport; create a good and strong image of here internationally; boost tourism; enhance social cohesion, and create a legacy effect. Above all else, the games will promote the reputation of the Police Service, the Prison Service and the Fire and Rescue Service at home and abroad.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for her answer. At the games in New York this year, there were more than 90 events, ranging from track and field to beach volleyball.

Mr Wells: Which one are you interested in?

Mr Dickson: They do not do it in fields, apparently.

Minister, bearing in mind that, year on year, each country that has hosted the games has attempted to improve on the facilities of the country that held the games previously, are you confident that Northern Ireland has the appropriate high standard of sporting facilities to deliver more than 90 sports? Given the superb facilities at New York this year, can she guarantee that Northern Ireland will have state-of-the-art facilities for the games?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Hopefully, a final decision on which facilities and venues will be used will be made in the autumn, and we will then look at what we can do and how we can broaden that out. Not every country had a team competing

in every discipline. Although I do not think that many beach volleyball teams will be competing — but they may — I am happy to say that our beaches have received better approval in the media than has been the case previously. I am also confident that, although the games are being held in Belfast, the World Police and Fire Games board is using every opportunity to examine facilities across the North. In conjunction with the services, the board will be looking to see where else we can maximise opportunities.

Miss M McIlveen: Is the Minister aware of any concerns among the relevant stakeholders as regards the 2013 World Police and Fire Games delivery body, which was set up by her Department? Given that that body and its chief executive are crucial to the success of the games, does she have confidence in them to deliver the games?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member is right to say that that is crucial, and I am not aware of any concerns about the World Police and Fire Games board. I am happy to speak to the Member if she wishes to share any concerns with me. Thus far, I have confidence in the chief executive, but I would welcome any Member bringing any concerns regarding that to my attention. If there are issues that need to be resolved, I would like to do so as soon as possible.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will other parts of the North benefit from the World Police and Fire Games, which are to be hosted in Belfast?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Belfast made a bid for the World Police and Fire Games and will be hosting them, but it is anticipated that there is potential for other sporting venues across the North to be used. I said that at least 15,000 friends and family members will come here for the games. When I was in New York, some of the athletes' families said that they were prepared to travel from New York to Philadelphia to look at historic sites. That might not seem a big distance, but it is a four-hour journey. A travel time of four hours from Belfast would allow visitors to see many of the attractions that we can offer in the North, and there should be economic benefits for the towns and villages where the events might take place.

Mrs McKeivitt: On the back of her visit to New York along with departmental officials, what lessons has the Minister learnt that would be beneficial to here, particularly lessons about the weather?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The hurricane coming to New York and its impact on the games was regrettable. When I met the athletes at the Javits Center and during the registration process, there was quite a buzz about the place.

The Member asks what lessons I have learnt. I have some observations that I intend to share with the 2013 World Police and Fire Games board. The opening ceremony in New York took hours and hours, because of the thousands of athletes who were competing. We have a history of parading here in the North, and I am sure that we could do things a lot better and a lot quicker.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I understand that there are some amplification problems. Members should indicate if they are unable to hear, and the technical people may be able to deal with the problem.

2012 Olympics: Training

3. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether there are any discussions to bring more Olympic teams to train in Northern Ireland ahead of the 2012 London Olympics.
(AQO 413/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Officials in Sport NI, in partnership with the governing bodies of sport, a number of other partners and my Department are holding a number of discussions with countries and sports to attract Olympic and Paralympic teams to train in the North. Those discussions are ongoing. I have made several announcements over the past four months about pre-games training camps and events that will take place in advance of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. For the Member's information, those include the Yonex Irish International Badminton Championships, the Australian boxing team and the Paralympics Ireland team.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her answer. She will be aware that Northern Ireland has already contributed many millions of pounds to the 2012 games. Does the Minister think that the sacrifice that many local sporting organisations have made is justified, in view of what looks like a fairly low return on the investment to attract overseas visitors for the games?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I understand the Member's frustration. The issue of lottery moneys, which people feel should have been invested in local sports and local athletes, comes up constantly. All that I can say is that, at this stage, it is still

early days. Pre-games training and qualifying events — mainly pre-games training — are not due to happen until spring 2012. Through Sport NI, we are in a competitive process with other countries to try to secure pre-games training here in the North but mostly to try to secure qualifying events. That process is ongoing. However, I share the Member's frustration and accept that people have a perception that lottery money that should have been invested here went to London and that people here are not getting the benefit that they feel they are entitled to.

Mr Weir: What progress has been made on efforts to ensure that the Olympic torch route goes through every council area in Northern Ireland?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Other Members have raised that important point. I visited the Beam project in County Tyrone not so long ago. The torch may go through part of the town but not the main part of it, where it could attract and inspire a lot of people. The London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) designs the route, and I believe that it has met with local representatives. Mervyn Storey has constantly raised with me — I am sure that he did the same with my predecessor — the case of Dervock and of Kennedy Kane McArthur. It is important that we use the Olympic torch not only to celebrate the achievements of former Olympians but to inspire potential Olympians. However, the route is down to LOCOG. If the Member feels that his constituency could be used better or that an opportunity to promote it positively has been missed to date, he can forward information to me, and I will be happy to forward it to LOCOG on his behalf.

2.45 pm

Mr Copeland: Has the Minister assessed Northern Ireland's deficiency in key areas of sports infrastructure, such as a velodrome, on our ability to host pre-Olympics training camps?

Ms Ní Chuilín: With respect, those are two separate questions. I met a council delegation from Downpatrick this morning to discuss the velodrome and the whole issue of the development of elite facilities. I am sure that other councils are in the same position when it comes to competing for elite facilities in preparation for London 2012. However, when I took on this portfolio the budget deficit in the block grant that we received and the gaps in capital funding meant that we could not provide elite facilities because the money was not there.

Even had the money been available, not every area that applied had a robust strategic outline business case that met the criteria for capital infrastructure.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Minister, what funding is available from the London 2012 organisers for visiting teams for pre-games training and qualifying events?

Ms Ní Chuilín: LOCOG, the London organising committee, offers £25,000 per country. Sport NI, through my Department, has received £100,000 a year for 2010-11 to 2011-12. In addition, Sport NI has set aside £50,000 for sporting bodies.

Regeneration: North-west

4. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what contribution her Department can make to the regeneration plan for the north-west region. (AQO 414/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has made a significant investment in culture, arts and leisure in the north-west in the past number of years. Major capital projects include the Playhouse Theatre; the new Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin Irish language arts and cultural centre; the Mute Meadow public art project; John Mitchel's GAC in Claudy; the Institute Football Club; and Newtown Stewart library.

DCAL will continue to fund various activities and services across its remit, for example, sporting or arts events, libraries, creative industries and community festivals, to name but a few. Departmental strategies, such as our current 10-year sport strategy, Sport Matters, will play the lead role in promoting sports. I could go on, but I anticipate more questions.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. In the context of the north-west, has DCAL given any funding to Derry City of Culture 2013? If the Department has, will she give us a breakdown of it?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The City of Culture competition was initiated by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in Britain and it was made clear at the outset that no additional funding would be provided to cities bidding for the award, either for the bidding process or for programming in the case of the successful city. However, I was in Derry again last week and I met some

of the key stakeholders involved in the city's regeneration plan. That delegation included representatives of the Culture Company, and, as I said in my first meeting with representatives of the Culture Company, DCAL anticipates receiving a business plan for funding for Derry City of Culture 2013. I look forward to receiving the business case for that bid.

Mr Swann: Taking into consideration how the Minister's Department is working on the regeneration plan for the north-west, what contribution can her Department make to the master plans for other towns and villages, including that for Ballymena in my constituency?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Here is an example of all politics being local. Well done. The honest answer is that I have absolutely no idea. I know that that is primarily a Department for Social Development (DSD) responsibility. Look at the Gaeltacht Quarter in west Belfast, in which DSD is taking the lead role, although DCAL made a significant contribution to Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich. I anticipate that my Department will receive a business plan from the Member in the not too distant future.

Mr Byrne: Will the Minister outline what other capital investment projects in DCAL's remit are being considered for the north-west region? Will some consideration be given to Gray's printing works in Strabane, which is synonymous with the printing of the American constitution over 200 years ago?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Again, that is another example of where all politics is local. If Strabane was not in the capital development programme for this comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, it is unlikely that it would be funded. However, there are ongoing discussions with ILEX, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Department for Social Development with regard to development in the north-west area, but nothing has been finalised yet.

2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games

5. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail how she intends to maximise the benefits from the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. (AQO 415/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department continues to work with local partners and London 2012 to maximise sporting, economic and social benefits with regard to sports, business, volunteering,

cultural activities and tourism. The games will encourage increased participation by young people in sport. The Sport Matters strategy sets out how we are developing our capacity to increase participation in sport and improve sporting facilities and performance. There will be an opportunity for everyone to see the Olympic torch and to showcase the North to the rest of the world.

As I said previously, work continues to attract Olympic-related business. More than 40 companies have won contracts estimated to be in excess of £40 million, which will help to create and sustain jobs. Invest NI continues to work with local businesses to encourage them to register and bid for further contracts that are available through the London 2012 network. We are working hard with Volunteer Now to increase the capacity and capability of volunteers, and that will help to develop major events planned for 2013 and beyond.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her answer. It is particularly good to hear that 40 companies are involved already. What meetings has she had with the Minister of Education to ensure that all schools benefit from being part of the UK-wide Olympic experience and, in an effort to make it local, those in South Antrim?

Ms Ní Chuilín: You are good, I have to say. I do not know whether you heard Lord Coe's interview yesterday on Radio Ulster about the participation of schools in the programmes thus far. There is room and development opportunities for other schools. By 2012, however, it is estimated that 30,000 schoolchildren will have taken part, which includes the Activ8 and the 5 Star Disability Sports Challenge. I have not had any discussions with the Minister of Education on the matter so far, other than to provide progress reports to the Department on the uptake of those programmes.

Mr Humphrey: I am pleased to hear the Minister say that she is looking forward to improved facilities for Northern Ireland. Are her Department and Sport Northern Ireland committed to ensuring the upgrade of the Dame Mary Peters track at Upper Malone?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not have the budget for it. However, that does not mean that I cannot accept a business case or try to prepare for the next CSR period? I am happy to do that. I will find out the exact position with Sport NI. I know that there have been discussions with the athletics

association. I will get an up-to-date position on the capital and revenue aspects of the Mary Peters track and forward it to the Member.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her answers. We have a tremendous culture of volunteerism here, and people have acted as volunteers in different capacities. Will the Minister take steps to encourage volunteers for the Olympics and Paralympics, and will she tell us what those steps might be?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. It is important that, where possible, every Department promotes volunteerism and uses the skills and expertise that we have in the North.

Since taking up office, I have worked with Volunteer Now on preparing for London 2012, the World Police and Fire Games and, indeed, the Commonwealth Games. Not only has it made sure that everybody is registered, but it is providing training, interviewing and volunteers for those events and more. I have been nothing but impressed with what I have seen so far.

Líofa 2015

7. **Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline progress on the uptake of her Department's Líofa 2015 campaign. (AQO 417/11-15)

8. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many people have signed up for Líofa 2015 since it was launched. (AQO 418/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: With your permission, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, I shall answer questions 7 and 8 together.

So far, progress on the Líofa 2015 campaign has been very good. In answer to question 8, in just three weeks, almost 600 people have signed up. There has been a lot of positive media coverage, and people see it for what it is: a genuine initiative to broaden the appeal of the Irish language. In such a short time, progress with and uptake of the Líofa 2015 initiative has been very good.

Ms J McCann: I congratulate the Minister on the Líofa 2015 initiative and on its success to date. When does the Minister intend to bring forward proposals for an Irish language Act?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I have said repeatedly, I intend to bring forward proposals for legislation to

protect the Irish language, in the same vein that the Scots Gàidhlig and Welsh languages have been protected in legislation. The Department is carrying out a significant scoping study, but I do not anticipate anything from that exercise coming to me until early in the new year.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for her response to my question. To date, 600 people have signed up to Líofo 2015. Will the Minister outline in greater detail the numbers representing both communities in Northern Ireland who have signed up? I understand that the difficulty with registering online is that people cannot signify which community they come from.

Ms Ní Chuilín: To be honest, it is a problem under data protection legislation, but it does not really matter. However, many people who attended the Líofo 2015 launch and indicated their desire to sign up to it identified themselves to me as members of the Protestant/unionist community. I do not know whether they have since signed up for the initiative or, indeed, whether anybody from other communities has. I cannot identify such things. One of the benefits of Líofo 2015 is that people can sign up and find out where their nearest class is, regardless of their background. Nevertheless, I appreciate the sentiment behind the Member's question.

Mr Irwin: The Minister received a business case for the campaign. How much will the project cost over the next four years? Does she have similar plans for Ulster Scots?

Ms Ní Chuilín: So far, the cost has been just over £2,000. It is about using existing facilities and resources; it is not about additional resources and spending money simply because it is a departmental initiative. It is about directing people to use existing classes.

I will meet the Ulster-Scots Agency within the next fortnight, and I look forward to hearing its proposals not for a similar initiative, but for something different. I have been told consistently by members of the Ulster-Scots community that their interest is not primarily in the language but in promoting their culture and heritage. I am happy to meet the agency to see how we can take forward initiatives to promote its work.

3.00 pm

Private Members' Business

Rural Businesses

Debate resumed on motion:

*That this Assembly recognises the importance of rural businesses to the local economy; and calls on the Executive to increase support for rural businesses and, in particular, to permit them to advertise on public roads and to erect directional signage.—
[Mr McQuillan]*

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat. Cuirim fáilte roimh an rún, agus beidh mé ag tabhairt tacaíochta dó. I support the motion, which allows Members to highlight the particular needs of rural businesses. What immediately comes to my mind is the issue of broadband. Later today, broadband, specifically the broadband needs of a particular rural community in west Tyrone, will be the subject of the Adjournment debate, and I will address the issue in more detail then. For the current debate, suffice it to say that the absence of proper broadband provision constitutes a major obstacle to rural businesses, as it reduces their competitiveness. People want to conduct their business online as much as possible. They want to carry out marketing and research activities and to receive orders via the internet. They are duty-bound, for example, to make PAYE returns online, and the same obligation will come into effect for VAT in April 2012. In rural areas, businesspeople, including farmers who want to apply for grants online, find the poor connectivity disabling. Any provision of high-speed broadband in many rural communities, if there even is a service, is usually intermittent at best and more costly than using a landline.

I also think specifically of the decline in the construction industry, which is hugely important in rural areas and communities. I am grateful to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for being present for the debate. Perhaps it would be possible for her to include in her response something of the Department of Agriculture and Regional Development's (DARD) commitment to rural broadband.

Ms Gildernew: The House must understand how the lack of access to broadband handicaps and causes detriment to rural businesses. I cannot get broadband at home, and many businesses

and A-level students complain bitterly about not having access. Members will probably hear that the North is 100% enabled for broadband. Although every exchange has broadband, the further away you are from an exchange, the less your chance of getting it.

DARD has contributed significantly to a number of boxes to try to enhance rural access. Ultimately, however, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has responsibility for broadband and is, therefore, the key Department. Despite DARD's trying to help, significant areas of the North still have no access to broadband, and that is a shame.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Member for her contribution and support everything that she said. I trust that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will attend the Adjournment debate on broadband and that, coming from a rural background, she will understand the issue.

The construction industry accounts for 17% of employment in rural areas. Rural communities and businesses are, therefore, hit particularly badly when that industry suffers a decline, as is happening at this time. Perhaps the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development would also outline whether her Department has any capital programmes or schemes that it intends to roll out over the next 18 months. I am a member of the Assembly all-party group on the construction industry, and we have made it our business to ask all Ministers what their capital priorities are and whether any scheme might get under way within the next 18 months.

My third and final point is on signage. I have considerable sympathy for those businesses in rural areas whose failure to attract business or their loss of business is at least partly as a consequence of there being no directional signage. I have made representations to Roads Service's western division about a plant hire company at Aghadulla Road, which is just off the A32 from Omagh to Dromore, and on behalf of bed and breakfast providers in mid-Tyrone. It makes sense to have a relaxation of the policy there. I am not talking about the brown tourism-type signage for a plant hire company; I am talking about the black-on-white direction signs.

Community, recreation and sporting facilities should also be given some consideration,

because, very often, where there have been sporting fixtures and football matches in rural communities, ambulances have passed the road where a young player has laid injured on a football pitch, for example. I know that that has happened in Dregish and Drumragh in west Tyrone. I highlight those two places where I believe Roads Service should relax the signage requirements.

If you are not allowed to put up any structure that is likely to act as a visual distraction for drivers, what the hell are the balls on the Falls about?

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

Mr McElduff: The ball within a ball at the end of the motorway is surely a distraction to motorists.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the opportunity to comment on the issue today, and I thank my party colleagues for tabling the motion. There is no doubting how important rural businesses are to the local economy in Northern Ireland. In my constituency, there are many very successful rural businesses making a good name for themselves across the Province and in markets further afield. I can think of Gilfresh Produce, Rapid International and Tayto, to name but a few. Those rural businesses are important employers that support our local economy immensely.

I want to focus on a largely operational issue for rural businesses, which is the ability to continue trading in harsh weather. I will focus particularly on last winter. I received many calls from rural businesses that had massive difficulties in transporting their produce to the shops and supermarkets across the Province. That was due to the fact that the rural roads were practically impassable, especially for larger vehicles. That had a huge impact, particularly on the agrifood sector, where the transport issues meant that the delivery of fresh produce to the supermarket shelves was severely delayed. In some cases, food was lost, and there was a cost to the companies involved.

In my opinion, the Department for Regional Development's (DRD) response to last year's winter crisis was inadequate. Of course, I do not criticise the men on the ground. However, I criticise the preparation and the obvious lack of grit and machinery resources. Some rural businesses, including two in particular that I know very well, approached me to see if they could buy grit from the Department of the Environment

(DOE) so that they could grit the roads themselves, but they were told no. That was a great stress for those concerned, especially in the week approaching Christmas, when large amounts of vegetables such as Brussels sprouts were going to the local supermarkets. Those businesses faced a great difficulty, and many of them almost ground to a halt at that stage. I have already raised the issue with the Regional Development Minister, and, as yet, I have not received a response. However, I urge the Minister to ensure that those key urban and rural routes are kept clear whatever the weather and to ensure that, come this winter, our rural businesses are not left stranded and our economy is not further damaged.

I have dealt with a high number of planning cases relating to directional signage and roadside advertisements. Planning Service has made a concerted effort to enforce the rules and to eradicate many road signs. I know that the enforcement section in the Armagh area has done that. Owners of rural businesses for which road signs have been up for 25 years have been asked to take them down. When the enforcers were told that those businesses had signs there for 25 years, they wanted proof. Believe it or not, some of that proof was quite difficult to produce. It can be a big issue.

I understand that there can be problems at busy road junctions or dangerous corners, for instance, where signage may not be practical. However, it must be recognised that rural businesses are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to advertising compared with businesses in larger towns or cities. In many cases, roadside signs are the only real and tangible way of alerting passing trade to the presence of rural businesses. Indeed, directional signage, particularly in more remote rural locations, is essential to avoiding missed trade and allowing ease of access for deliveries. The Minister of the Environment must recognise the difficulties that are faced by rural businesses and seek to support them through a sympathetic signage policy, which, while not spoiling the countryside through the use of oversized signage, allows for a sensible solution in which businesses are not placed at a disadvantage.

In Newry and Armagh, rural businesses are our lifeline and they help to sustain rural life, economically and socially. They must be protected and encouraged, and I would like to see the two

areas that I have highlighted addressed in an appropriate fashion. I support the motion.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Members who tabled the motion. I am confident that rural businesses across all our constituencies will welcome the fact that the Assembly is giving time to debate such an important issue.

Rural businesses across Northern Ireland struggle daily with the many barriers that are associated with running and growing their business in a countryside setting, and those barriers are made especially tough by the present economic climate. Those barriers often take the form of planning issues, increased transportation and delivery costs, and access to broadband, which, although key to a modern small business, is often unavailable in certain rural areas. Members will be aware that I have spoken previously on the issue of rural broadband in the House and at the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. I welcome the fact that DARD and DETI are working together to provide solutions to an issue that is so critical to our rural economy.

As an example of a successful agribusiness, I want to commend Green Energy Technology Ltd, a Northern Ireland company that exhibited at the DARD stand at last week's National Ploughing Championships in County Kildare. This is the second year that the Department has recognised that successful growing business in that way. The company specialises in wood pellet boilers, solar panels and other emerging renewable technologies, and it is an excellent example of diversification from a dairy farm to an emerging technology company. It is also located in a rural setting, which just happens to be in my constituency of Upper Bann.

That business and countless other examples across Northern Ireland prove that, in the right market and with the right business plan, a rural company can succeed. However, support from the Executive is required for those companies now more than ever, and we need to look no further than the motion to see the problems in getting that support. The motion brings in three different Executive ministries, DETI, DARD and DRD, and that highlights the difficulties that rural businesses face when looking to the Executive for support.

Rural dwellers who may well have come up with the next successful enterprise concept are faced with an often confusing web of bureaucracy

when it comes to getting the assistance that they need. We must ensure that we do all that we can to promote economic growth by encouraging entrepreneurs to come forward and to set up businesses across Northern Ireland. If the Executive wish to support rural businesses, they must make it easier for rural dwellers to receive support and guidance. I call on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to work alongside her ministerial colleagues in DETI and DRD to foster a joined-up approach to providing that much-needed support and assistance to rural businesses. Given the barriers that they often face, some of which I mentioned earlier, and the present economic climate, we very much welcome and support the motion and its desired intention of increasing support for our rural businesses.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dobson: Yes, I will.

Mr Allister: The Member referred to some of the difficulties that rural businesses face. One of the greatest difficulties in getting a business going and keeping it going is the public knowing that it is there, which puts focus directly on the issue of signage. Does the Member agree that there was a missed opportunity in the drafting of PPS 21 to deal with that issue, and, if not, an addendum or revision of PPS 17 is an imperative that cannot wait much longer?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should resume his seat. As was stated by the Speaker earlier, the Member is not to be heard, and other Members should remember that when they are giving way.

Mr Allister: On a point of order. The ruling of the Speaker was that I was not to be called.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should resume his seat.

Mr Allister: The ruling of the Speaker was that I was not to be called.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should resume his seat. Mrs Dobson has the Floor.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I have finished.

3.15 pm

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the debate and thank those who tabled the motion. I would have liked the motion to be more detailed and the debate

to be longer because of the importance of the issue.

All our local businesses find themselves forced to operate under extremely difficult circumstances, but small rural businesses face particular challenges, which are generated by isolation and location, to which the motion refers. Rising to those challenges and overcoming them will require a bit more than road signage.

I want to draw attention to some of the challenges. Evidence suggests that the impact of the recession on the construction industry is affecting the rural economy more severely than the urban economy; planned cuts on public spending will have a further crushing impact on the number of public sector contracts and employment levels in rural areas; and the communication and transportation costs faced by rural businesses have a much more negative impact on their competitiveness — in other words, communication and transportation costs are much higher for rural businesses. In rural areas, it is difficult to maintain a competitive edge against rival urban companies because of the absence of an available pool of trained or skilled labour and training facilities to help development.

In the face of all those challenges, rural businesses that are trying to keep afloat in the current economic climate find themselves drowning in a sea of red tape and bureaucracy. Rural businesses tend, by and large, to be small, with a few exceptions. Common economic sense should prevail, and small businesses with fewer than five employees should be exempt from many unnecessary strangling regulations.

Ms Gildernew: I thank the Member for giving way.

When the Member cites statistics, it may be helpful for him to know that the previous Minister for Social Development took a unilateral decision that the Department would no longer contribute to towns and villages with populations of fewer than 4,500 people. I am not sure whether the Member is aware of that. That effectively rules out towns such as Lisnaskea and Irvinestown in my constituency. In the last mandate, I felt strongly about the Department turning its back on the rural constituency.

If the Member felt that the motion was too short, he could have tabled an amendment to incorporate some of his thinking.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Member for telling me what I already knew; that is much appreciated. However, I am dealing with the motion as it is not as it may be amended. Debates on issues such as rural businesses need much more time. I appeal to the Business Committee not to treat every issue in exactly the same way; some debates, such as this one, should have priority.

I was about to compliment the Member, but she was in to attack and undermine me before I could do that. Some of those challenges were outlined in a rural White Paper published in March this year. My colleague will admit, perhaps, that it was a year or two too late, but, nevertheless, it was published. It is a good document, and its recommendations need to form a key part of a major debate on the subject and to trigger meaningful departmental action. I do not want to get into a debate between one Department and another, but we need joined-up government and Departments working together.

There are significant challenges, some of which I have had the chance to touch on. There are also tremendous opportunities out there, and I will touch on them quickly. There are opportunities in respect of renewable energy where we can do all sorts of things in rural areas. There are opportunities for rural areas in agriculture and food and in tourism. However, we have to clear away the bureaucracy to ensure that people in rural areas have a real opportunity to work and to do what they want to do.

It is very difficult to get a business going in a rural area. Believe it or not, I do travel and talk to people in rural areas, and I am very heartened when I see small businesses growing on the back of farm businesses that are struggling. Engineering and renewable energy are important, but there are tremendous opportunities in respect of food production and tourism, and we need to get our act together on those issues and make sure that people in rural areas have adequate opportunity to work close to their homes, rather than having to travel 30 or 40 miles to work.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus tá fáilte romhaibh. I am grateful to Mr Campbell and Mr McQuillan for tabling the motion and to all the other Members who have taken part in the

debate. The motion raises the important issue of Executive support for rural businesses. I emphasise the fact that it calls for Executive support, because, although my Department provides significant support to our rural businesses and communities, I am very clear that all parts of our Administration must have responsibilities towards our rural areas and rural communities.

DARD cannot and should not be the sole provider of support to our rural communities. My predecessor and I have worked very hard, through initiatives such as the rural White Paper and rural proofing, to get other Departments to accept rural issues as the main part of their business. Aside from the Department providing direct support for rural businesses, there are many other parts of government whose policies directly or indirectly affect rural communities. Many examples of those were given throughout the debate: reference was made to issues around DOE and the planning regime; DRD on roads and water and transport infrastructure; DETI and Invest NI on business support, telecommunications and broadband issues; and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) on skills and support for businesses. Therefore, it is an area where we need to work collectively in the Executive to make sure that we are supporting our rural communities and rural businesses.

Many Members referred to the rural White Paper. That initiative is trying to get an overarching tie-in from all Departments that have an interest and responsibility to support our rural communities and rural businesses. I wholeheartedly support the motion's calls for support for our rural businesses, and I want to take this opportunity to ask others to support those businesses.

Members raised many points throughout the debate, some of which are relevant to other Departments. I know that there are officials here from other Departments, particularly DRD, and they will respond in due course to particular issues, such as signage. It has been very clear from the nature of the debate that signage is an issue. I have dealt with it in my constituency in the past, so I am aware of the challenges that it presents to rural businesses.

In moving the motion, Adrian McQuillan talked about the importance of the agrifood sector, and that is not to be underestimated. Since taking

up this office, I have consistently emphasised the importance of the agrifood sector not only to the wider economy but to the whole rural fabric. The facts speak for themselves. Gross turnover from the food and drinks processing industry was estimated to be £2.7 billion in 2010, which was an increase of 8.3% on the previous year. In 2009, some 70% of sales were to markets outside the North of Ireland. That in itself illustrates an important source of export earnings for our economy. Therefore, the agrifood sector has demonstrated time and time again its ability to grow. Even given the current economic downturn, it continues to be a major employer for the rural economy right across the whole sector.

There are obvious further opportunities for growth within new global markets that are developing and expanding, and I have no doubt that the agriculture sector is capable of meeting the additional demand that that would create. We already have good foundations to build upon, and we already work closely with other Executive Departments and industry representatives.

From those foundations, the Focus on Food strategy was produced last year, but I feel that it needs to be taken a step further. What we need to do is to move it to the next level and to agree strategic targets for the agrifood sector up to 2020 that should achieve export-led growth.

DARD directly supports rural businesses through axis 1 of the rural development programme. We already provide support to rural businesses through the competitiveness element of axis 1. The programme provides support for agrifood and forestry businesses. One funding measure in axis 1 that I wish to highlight is the processing and marketing grant scheme, which is probably better known to most people as the PMG scheme. It is part of the wider rural development programme and has a profile budget of £21.5 million to spend by the end of 2015.

Since the scheme opened back in 2007, my Department has committed grant aid of £8.4 million to 27 companies. That £8.4 million of assistance brings an investment in the rural economy of at least £21 million to agrifood companies. I can report that we have paid out grants of more than £5 million against our commitments and are on target to spend our balance by the end of this financial year.

There is sometimes a perception among small-scale agrifood processors that PMG is for larger

companies. Therefore, I take this opportunity to reaffirm that the PMG scheme is also open to them. The aim was to test the market with small-scale processors and offer a less cumbersome application form and process for those planning to invest up to £125,000 in their business. I am pleased to report that we have had some success with that, with 22 companies, which plan to invest £2 million, close to final assessment. Furthermore, let us not forget the PMG applications from agrifood companies where the planned investment is more than £125,000, for we have 16 companies applying for up to £16 million. That represents continual investment in the rural economy and is to be very much welcomed.

Under the quality of life measures in axis 3 of the rural development programme, measure 3.1 helps diversification into non-agricultural activity and measure 3.2 assists business creation and development. A total of £40 million is available to assist the creation of new rural businesses and the development of existing ones. A further £12 million is available under measure 3.3 for the encouragement of tourism activities, and I know that some Members picked up on the potential of tourism in our rural communities. The measures provide support for larger infrastructure projects, but support is also available for smaller, individual businesses that provide tourist accommodation, tourism activity-based enterprises and craft facilities, to give just a few examples.

Existing businesses and private individuals wishing to start up a business may also be offered financial support at a rate of up to 50% of the eligible costs, up to a maximum grant of £50,000, to assist with building costs and the purchase of equipment necessary for the development of their enterprise. Coincidentally, signage is actually an eligible expenditure under that programme but is subject to planning permission. As a result, that is where it falls down and where the weakness lies. Further assistance is also available for bespoke training in publicity and marketing, again at a rate of 50% of eligible costs, up to a maximum grant of £5,000. I know that I have quoted a lot of figures, but I wanted to give Members a flavour of the type of support that is there for not just farmers but the rural community in general.

In addition to the funding provided through the rural development programme, my Department supports rural businesses through supply chain development branch, which works to improve

the capability of agrifood stakeholders and to help them develop their supply chains. It does so by providing advice on agrifood supply chains; facilitating better communication and collaboration throughout the whole supply chain; co-ordinating relevant training and development; providing focus and support for group initiatives; and maintaining a network of contacts in each agrifood sector. It also works to increase the uptake of rural development support provided by DARD.

Of course, we also provide assistance to rural businesses through our colleges, through significant investment in research and development and through the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute. Some Members picked up on the particular difficulties with the rural development programme and businesses' ability to access bank lending for their match funding. I am aware of the availability issue. It has been raised with me on many occasions. My predecessor met local banks to discuss the impact of the credit crunch on rural businesses and farming and to stress the importance of how important the agrifood sector is to our economy. She also asked the institutions to look sympathetically at proposals from businesses that had a commitment from the Administration for match funding.

3.30 pm

The rural White Paper was mentioned on a few occasions. I have led the development of the action plan. The consultation process closed earlier in 2011. By and large, the response was positive. Some issues were raised with regard to tightening up targets and ensuring that they were realistic and achievable in the time ahead. I am in the middle of a series of bilateral meetings with other Ministers because that tie-in is needed. We want there to be concrete departmental targets right across the board so that when I bring the final paper to the Executive before Christmas we can move forward on a positive footing. That is an example of the Executive's commitment. The rural White Paper is an Executive project that is led by DARD. It gives a commitment from the Executive to support and protect the rural way of life.

Broadband was an obvious issue to which many Members referred in the debate. It is vital that rural businesses have access to broadband; if they do not, it can be to their detriment. If their access is not fast enough, they might as

well not have any at all. Incidentally, on Monday 26 September 2011, I met Arlene Foster, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, to explore what more we can do. During the previous term, DARD was able to put some funding towards rural broadband through the anti-poverty and social isolation fund. We are looking towards that fund again. There are clear gaps that we could all identify. I am sure that we could all name places that do not have broadband or have very slow access to it; therefore, we must take that issue forward seriously. Arlene Foster and I discussed it in a meeting yesterday. We are committed to working together to ensure that the rural community is not disadvantaged in comparison with urban settings.

In my response, I picked up mainly on DARD's work and what it does to support businesses. As I said, I will ensure that points on planning issues, DOE, DEL and so on are relayed to relevant Ministers. We all know that the economic downturn has created challenging conditions for all businesses but particularly for rural businesses. I welcome any further assistance that can be provided to them either in the form of additional funding or allowing them to advertise or to put up directional signage for their business. Such a move would help to level the playing field for rural businesses, increase their visibility, help them to attract new trade and help them to survive. I want to put it on record that I will continue to do all that I can to support rural businesses directly and to encourage others to take their rural responsibilities seriously. That is exactly what the draft rural White Paper aims to do.

I will pick up on Barry McElduff's points on capital programmes and what DARD is doing to get funding into rural communities. He will note that the farm nutrient management scheme kept the construction industry going in rural communities by getting funding to them. That was a positive thing during the past couple of difficult years. Other grant schemes that I mentioned earlier include the rural development programme and the farm modernisation programme. They benefit not only farmers but their suppliers, which is also good for rural businesses. Positive work is being done.

In finishing my remarks, I want to commend the motion to the House. I support it wholeheartedly.

Mr Campbell: The debate was wide-ranging, as has been mentioned. My colleague Adrian McQuillan moved the motion. He referred to the agrifood sector, as did many Members and the Minister in her response. He also referred to the importance of tourism to the local economy. He raised the issue of brown signage, to which Members referred repeatedly, and numerous Members talked about the size and location of signs. We all know and appreciate that there are difficulties in getting the criteria exactly right for the supply of such signage.

Mr McMullan talked about the problems faced by farmers. He also brought in the context of the Housing Executive and local councils and what they can do to assist. Of course, that is very relevant, particularly in isolated rural areas, where most local councillors are, in fact, rural residents themselves.

Then we heard from the inimitable Mr Nesbitt, who, I see, is not in his place at the moment. Among other things, he talked about his experience with satnavs. He may have an upmarket satnav, because he was a very well paid television presenter and a very well paid victims' commissioner. However, now that he is a more lowly paid MLA, he may get the variety of satnav that most people use, which makes mistakes. All of us will have read stories in the press about satnavs that have led drivers to local fields, quarries or pools. Thankfully, Mr Nesbitt has avoided all of that, because he has an upmarket satnav; good on him. Hopefully, he will long live to reap the benefit of it. When he moved away from that issue, he mentioned matters that were relevant to rural areas, particularly in his constituency of Strangford.

Next to speak was Mr Dallat, who is also from the East Londonderry constituency. He referred to the importance of matters such as help for rural businesses featuring on the school curriculum. That is a very appropriate reference. He also alluded to the red tape and bureaucracy involved in the setting-up of businesses, which is something that I will come back to in a moment or two.

Mr Lunn from the Alliance Party said that he had had very short notice to prepare his speech. I was wondering what the excuse would be if he had had long notice, but he managed reasonably well with short notice. He talked about the caveats and the problems that are faced due to the multiplicity of signs, not just in Lisburn but in other locations. That is accepted

by all, but it is not an excuse nor should it be used as a reason for Departments, particularly DRD, not to furnish the appropriate signage in the correct location.

Jim Wells also alluded to the issue of signs. He made the remarkable statement that he has come across some signs that are bigger than the businesses they advertise. I would like to see either the small size of the business that he alludes to or the large size of the sign that he alludes to. I think I got the point that he was trying to make. I will not comment on whether he may have exaggerated a bit.

Jim Wells also referred to the regulation that is required in rural areas. That is a point, and hopefully the Minister will bear it in mind. He also talked about flexibility being required, which is an issue that I will come back to shortly.

Barry McElduff referred to broadband access. I just checked the topic of the Adjournment debate, and it is about broadband access, so I am sure that he will have an opportunity to elaborate on that. He also talked about the importance of the construction industry, not just in west Tyrone but in other rural areas, which was a relevant point.

Mr Irwin talked about the issues that have affected Newry and Armagh. He mentioned local delicacies, including Tayto. I am sure that everybody who has ever sampled other, secondary crisps like Walkers, which are promoted by a certain sports presenter, will admit that they pale into insignificance in comparison with Tayto. That is a promotion for his constituency, not for a particular company.

Mrs Dobson from Upper Bann referred to the issue of green energy in her constituency, which was a very pertinent point. She also talked about co-ordination between Departments, which is something that I want to return to. Alasdair McDonnell also talked about the problem of cuts in public expenditure, which we are all very much concerned about and having to grapple with.

In closing, I want to talk about some of the generic points that were raised. Before I do so, some of the matters around flexibility have to be dealt with.

I have an example, but I will not name names, to spare the Minister's blushes. A small business in a rural location faced a fundamental problem, not to do with signage, that threatened its

profitability and existence. I asked for and got a meeting with a Minister, for which the business and I were grateful. The meeting was in June, and minutes were taken. Six weeks later, because no response was forthcoming, I made a discreet call to the Minister's office to see what had happened as a result of the meeting. The next day, the Minister's office rang the constituents to ask them the reason for their meeting with the Minister. To say that they and I were furious would be an understatement. I let that Minister know in no uncertain terms that that was unacceptable, and that Minister apologised. However, there needed to be greater flexibility not just in getting back to the constituents but in doing something about the problem. Not only did they take a long time coming back but the response was negative. There has to be, as many Members have said, greater flexibility in how we deal with problems in rural areas.

Another issue, which Mr McQuillan, the Member who proposed the motion, mentioned concerned a rural business in Garvagh that is trying to get appropriate and correct signage. It is having difficulty with Roads Service in trying to get that correct signage. While it is trying to do that, a local broadcasting company is with the business, filming for a series that will be shown on television over the next few months, and it is aware of the problems that the business is facing. You would imagine that the Department responsible would say, "We should have tried to resolve this anyway, but, given that there will probably be some embarrassing commentary on a television programme about us, we will get our act together and sort this out". Unfortunately not.

Those are some of the flexibilities that have to be taken into account in trying to resolve the issue. The problem of broadband access will be dealt with shortly in a debate later this afternoon. However, it is a major problem in rural areas because so many businesses are dependent on broadband access for their growth. If they do not have that, they do not have growth, and they have to move.

Depopulation of rural areas is an ongoing problem that has been around for many years, some would say decades. A multiplicity of Departments is responsible, but it appears to me that DARD, DETI and DRD are the principal Departments that can help. I am glad that the Minister made a response along the lines that there will be co-ordination. We need to see that

having a practical effect on the ground to deliver for rural communities.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the importance of rural businesses to the local economy; and calls on the Executive to increase support for rural businesses and, in particular, to permit them to advertise on public roads and to erect directional signage.

Government and the Community and Voluntary Sector

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

Mr Beggs: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the invaluable contribution made by the community and voluntary sector, particularly in assisting the most vulnerable people in society; believes that where the sector provides public services, it is appropriate that it should be adequately funded for this provision and any related overhead costs; and calls upon the Minister for Social Development to ensure that there is an effective working relationship between all Executive Departments and the community and voluntary sector.

I declare an interest as a member of Raloo Presbyterian Church, where I also serve as a Boys' Brigade officer. I am a member of the Carrickfergus Neighbourhood Development Group, a voluntary community group that helps in Love Lane, a disadvantaged area. I am also a member of the Carrickfergus children's locality group and a committee member of Horizon Sure Start, which operates in Larne and Carrickfergus. I am also a committee member of the Carrickfergus Community Drug and Alcohol Advisory Group, which provides counselling and support to people who have suffered from addiction. I have worked with young people, in particular, to raise awareness of the harm caused by the misuse of solvents, drugs and alcohol. I am also involved in the Carrickfergus road safety committee.

3.45 pm

The motion refers to:

"the invaluable contribution made by the community and voluntary sector, particularly in assisting the most vulnerable people in society".

I suspect that our health service could not survive without the major contribution of the community and voluntary sector and the many specialist health groups that assist those who suffer from particular illnesses. We must recognise the essential work of Macmillan Cancer Support nurses or the Children's Hospice. We recognise that the health service is essential;

equally essential is some of the health work of the community and voluntary sector.

The community and voluntary sector frequently provides essential services and reaches places that statutory agencies cannot go. About a year ago, when the drugs craze was hitting our young people, the Carrickfergus Community Drug and Alcohol Advisory Group and Preventing Addiction Larne organised public meetings in the local town halls to advise teachers and parents. Indeed, I understand that many police officers took it upon themselves to come in civilian clothing to learn more about mephedrone etc.

The community and voluntary sector is frequently at the edge and provides knowledge that the statutory agencies are not aware of. I also think of the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster, which receive relatively little core funding for their headquarters. However, all the local groups throughout isolated rural communities are led by local volunteers. Therefore, a little bit of seed funding has resulted in a tremendous amount of volunteering. We need to reflect on the scale of the contribution of the community and voluntary sector.

The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action estimates that there are 4,700 voluntary and community groups in Northern Ireland employing more than 27,000 people. On top of that, we must add the tens of thousands of volunteers. My own Boys' Brigade at 1st Raloo receives a few hundred pounds for equipment each year, yet 70 boys there are given training and experiences that benefit them. Volunteers do that for free and on a regular basis. It works very well, particularly for the older boys in the company section, in conjunction with the Duke of Edinburgh scheme. Young people take part in community service and volunteer, usually working with the young, elderly and vulnerable. That provides them with good life skills that they can take with them.

I was a bit shocked when I saw that the sector had an annual income of some £570 million, most of which comes from outside government. About 45% is public funding, about two thirds of which comes from government's direct purchase of goods and services from community and voluntary organisations.

Most people working in the sector have a vocation to work in it. It is not just a job, and they do not watch the clock. They frequently go beyond the requirements of normal employment.

I think of Carrickfergus Home-Start. There is a very dedicated central administrator, and the service is delivered entirely by volunteers who befriend families that may be struggling and give them additional support. Most organisations in the sector have relatively low administration and staff costs of 14%. Fortunately, we now have a Charity Commission to deal with any inappropriate administration levels incurred by those who claim to be charities. Most do not have significant reserves on which to draw should difficulties arise.

There is a huge variety of groups including small local groups such as the village playgroup, church crèches and mums-and-tots, as well as larger groups such as Bryson House. That has won openly tendered contracts advertised by government to administer parts of the warm homes scheme, deliver door-to-door recycling services for local government and deliver specialist equipment for sorting known as material recovery facilities (MRFs). There are also national charities, such as Barnardo's and Action for Children, which work with parents and families through Sure Start to reduce risks to society and help the vulnerable.

The question is this: why should government invest in and value the community and voluntary sector? As a former member of a local strategic partnership almost 10 years ago, I saw that statutory bodies frequently could not deliver the access and service that others could. At one stage, we had to withdraw a £100,000 contract from a local FE college because it could not get people into basic education classes. It did not have the outreach into the community.

I have heard that the YMCA is delivering successfully by working closely with the local community and by partnering a range of bodies and education providers. I have been advised that, last year, 21 individuals gained qualifications giving them a second chance in their education. Five gained European computer driving licence (ECDL) qualifications, five obtained GCSE maths at grade C or above, and 11 gained emergency first aid qualifications. That brings hope and encouragement to many people in an area of my constituency that includes the Northlands ward, which is ranked 37 out of the 582 wards in Northern Ireland under the multiple deprivation measure.

That funding is at risk. Changes in funding rules could alter some of the legs of the stool,

which could cause it to fall. I understand that small pockets of deprivation (SPOD) funding programmes are being offered but not for employment support costs. This is in an area of disadvantage and weak community infrastructure, and the difficulties around services being delivered entirely by volunteers will put them at risk and further endanger the area.

The Larne community care council has lost 100% of its children's fund support. It is located in the Antville ward, an area recognised as being "at risk" under the neighbourhood renewal scheme. Essentially, the care council provides a child-minding facility and after-school club. Its manager and administrative worker were put on protective notice some time ago, and it is drawing on reserves while it tries to find another source of funding. However, without a manager and an administrative worker, it will falter at some point.

Volunteers frequently cannot carry these larger bodies without help. It is important that this is recognised and that the good work already being done is not threatened. We need to get better value from what we are doing and better funding, but the Department needs to ensure that it is coherent and that it minimises the bureaucracy involved in the administration of funding. For example, Mencap has numerous contracts with different service providers. The community and voluntary sector needs to be able to get on with doing what it does best: delivering an essential service to the community in need.

Mr Brady (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I declare an interest as a non-executive committee member of the confederation of community groups of Newry and district.

As Deputy Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, I will advise the House of information that the Committee has received from the Department on community development budget reductions to date. That information is directly relevant to the motion. In its regular budget update on Thursday 22 September, the Department for Social Development informed the Committee of a planned 25% reduction in funding to infrastructure support organisations that provide services to the voluntary and community sector at a regional level. The Committee was also informed that the new arrangements will take effect from April 2012, with significant

changes to current support arrangements and a clear emphasis on rationalisation, with the ending of current contracts and their replacement with more targeted support arrangements.

The Committee was also informed that that decision, while securing the required budget savings, enables funding to be largely maintained across key community development programmes and essential front line services up to March 2015. The Committee for Social Development expressed concern about the 25% reduction in funding because officials were not able to elaborate on the new arrangements from April next year or on what support organisations are affected. The Committee has formally requested clarification on those points and on the impact of the changes to advice, volunteering and other services to the public.

The DSD briefing referred to the Minister for Social Development's recent speech to the NI Council for Voluntary Action on this subject. I note that the speech, made on 8 September 2011, referred to achieving a 25% budget reduction through plans to advertise for one strategic partner or consortium to deliver regional infrastructure services. The Minister also said that:

"Broadly similar approaches will be used to support what we describe as thematic work — volunteering, regional advice services, support for women in disadvantaged areas and the faith sector".

DSD papers referred to a consultation exercise to review its regional infrastructure programme. I note that the 2010 consultation paper listed 10 funded organisations under that programme such as Advice NI, Citizens Advice, the Law Centre NI and women's centres and regional partnerships. Usefully, the consultation paper refers to the impact of the recession on the third sector — the voluntary and community sector — including an increased demand for key services such as welfare rights, housing and debt advice and the likely decline in income from investments, charitable giving and public sector income.

As I said, the Committee expressed concern about the Minister's planned reduction of 25% in funding to infrastructure support organisations. The Minister for Social Development knows that the organisations I have mentioned and others in the voluntary and community sector provide public services assisting the most vulnerable people in society, as the motion states.

At this time, as the impact of the recession hits the third sector, there is a clear challenge for the Minister and his officials to get the strategic partner/consortium arrangement right. I note that, in his speech on 8 September, the Minister said that he had asked his officials:

"to ensure that funding is distributed on the basis of clearly evidenced need, for clearly demonstrable outcomes".

I can assure the House that the Committee for Social Development will scrutinise the Department's plans and the arrangements put in place next April very closely and report back to the House as necessary.

I will now speak briefly as a Member, rather than as Deputy Chair. As someone who worked in the voluntary sector for 27 years before coming to the House, I have to say that the value of the voluntary sector to the community is immeasurable. I was a welfare rights worker in Newry, and the number of disadvantaged and vulnerable people who do not have access to statutory organisations and use the voluntary sector increases every year. We now face so-called welfare reform — cuts dressed up as reform. Indeed, in an article in the 'Daily Telegraph' yesterday it was very clear, as Treasury officials have told the Chancellor, that it is unlikely that the Budget will accommodate welfare reform and that the IT system will not be fit for purpose.

The point I am making is that there will be a much more focused need for advice services. Umbrella organisations such as NICVA perform an essential role, as do the Law Centre, Advice NI, CAB and other organisations. Those organisations depend solely on funding. They need sustained and proper funding.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Brady: They need guarantees that funding will continue and that they will be able to perform the services that they have performed very well, indeed, sometimes better than the statutory sector.

4.00 pm

Mr Easton: I support the motion and thank the Members who tabled it. The community and voluntary sectors play a vital role in our society, especially in areas deemed to be at economic disadvantage.

I have worked with many community and voluntary groups throughout the years, and I want to pay tribute to them today. They are Rathgill Community Association; Kilcooley Community Forum; Breezemount Community Association; Beechfields Residents' Association; Clandeboye Community Club; Redburn Loughview Community Forum; Whitehill Community Association — I hope that the Minister is taking note of all these — Conlig Village Association; Millisle Community Association; and Bloomfield Community Association. There are many others across North Down.

It should be noted that some of those groups secure funding from either central or local government and some none at all. Never have I seen such a more dedicated group of people eager to advance the fortunes of their areas and communities, particularly in tackling social disadvantage and education and health problems. I know that all work very well with government. Each Minister for Social Development has met them, from Margaret Ritchie to the new Minister in this mandate, Nelson McCausland. Those voluntary and community groups form part of the fabric of our society. Many fill a gap that successive Governments have failed to occupy. They act as representatives and lobby groups in order to tell government what they need and what resources they require for their communities. They know best, from working in the sector of their relevant area. They also provide a valuable resource for their local communities.

In a speech to representatives of the voluntary and community sector only a matter of weeks ago, the Minister for Social Development, Nelson McCausland, stated that he fully recognised:

“the significant contribution that the voluntary and community sector makes to civic society in Northern Ireland.”

He stated clearly:

“I am committed to ensuring that my department will continue to work closely with the sector to deliver social, economic, cultural and environmental improvement for the people of Northern Ireland.”

That statement has to be welcomed.

In the run-up to the 2010 general election, David Cameron talked about building a big society. Mr Cameron had no further to look than Northern Ireland to see how a big society works, given the relationship between the voluntary and

community sector and government, especially now that devolution is up and running.

I welcome the outcome of the consultation on the concordat for relationships with the voluntary and community sector, in which all consultees welcomed the renewed commitment to a partnership between government and the voluntary sector. I look forward to the publication of a detailed action plan. The community and voluntary sector not only acts as a lobby group for those that it represents but assists and supports various programmes. I know that there are schemes running in my constituency that help young people to obtain some basic skills, such as reading and literacy skills and computer skills, that will help young people when they are looking for a job. Many of those young people have not been helped by the education system, and such local initiatives to help and support them, coupled with assistance from the Department for Employment and Learning, offer one example of the sector's benefits and value in society.

I am keen to see a good relationship continue with the community and voluntary sector. Therefore, I support the motion.

Mr A Maginness: I commend those who tabled the motion, particularly Mr Beggs. It is an important motion, because it invites the House and government to look seriously at the role of the voluntary sector in Northern Ireland. It calls in particular for an effective working relationship between that sector and government. Of course, this institution is based on partnership between Catholic and Protestant, between nationalist and unionist and among the political parties that have been elected to it. It is right and fitting, therefore, that we should be talking in terms of building a partnership between the voluntary sector and government. That should be the keystone of the approach by government to the voluntary and community sector.

The motion acknowledges the invaluable contribution that the community and voluntary sector makes. Together with other parties in the Chamber, the SDLP certainly agrees with that assessment, and long may that continue. However, it is insufficient for us, as Members, to simply acknowledge that. We have to put flesh on the bones. Through government, we have to assist the voluntary and community sector to carry out its work. It is not sufficient, therefore, for us to say, “Get on with it, and we will support

you.” There has to be a much closer relationship between government and the voluntary sector if we are to build a serious partnership that embraces the good work of that sector and the work that government requires to be done in the community.

There are certain things that government cannot do in the community that the community and voluntary sector can do, and do much better than government. That is the importance of the voluntary sector. I think of groups like the Simon Community and its work with the homeless. It is very difficult for government to deal effectively with homelessness at a street level. That organisation does so, and it needs the support of government. The Society of St Vincent de Paul is one church organisation that deals with poverty in the community. That is another good example, as are other church groups, from no matter which confession they emanate.

The credit unions have carried out marvellous work to empower individuals, families and communities to build financial resources and share them right throughout the community. It is very important, therefore, that the partnership is developed. We should listen very carefully to the voluntary and community sector. The green new deal emanated from that sector. Unfortunately, however, government has not responded to that in an effective fashion. The idea was to use moneys to prise further money from the European development bank. Government has not responded to that effectively. If government wants to encourage the community and voluntary sector, it should revisit the green new deal so that proper funding may go to that enterprise. It is money well spent, because it means that we will improve the quality of our homes —

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

Mr A Maginness: — develop energy efficiency and reduce the level of fuel poverty in our community.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in today's debate. I also thank my East Antrim colleague Mr Beggs for proposing the motion. I declare a number of interests before I commence: as a leader in 1st Greenisland Boys' Brigade Company, a trustee of Greenisland War Memorial Sports Club and an elder in Greenisland Presbyterian Church, all of which deliver in the voluntary and community sector.

I am pleased to be able to debate the issue today and to highlight the role of the voluntary and community sector. I will also raise concerns about its sustainability in the current economic climate. Voluntary and community organisations are working on some of the most pressing social issues facing Northern Ireland today. Organisations provide Northern Ireland with an invaluable expertise and specialised services that work to combat crucial issues such as preventing reoffending, preventing family breakdown, helping older people to remain independent, raising levels of educational attainment, helping lone-parent families to find employment that works for them, and regenerating and developing communities. Those are but a few of the voluntary activities that go on across Northern Ireland every day. The organisations have a wide remit, including giving advice, advocacy, campaigning and influencing policies and the delivery of goods and services. By investing in the community and voluntary sector, we gain value for money in front line services, which leads to financial savings in government.

Others have given examples, and I shall also give some examples. Jobtrack is a partnership between the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO), the Probation Board and the Northern Ireland Prison Service. It is estimated that Jobtrack's programme, by working with ex-offenders, produces an average saving of £1.4 million a year to the economy.

Other Members referred to Home-Start. I was the founder chair of Home-Start Carrickfergus. Home-Start, with its 900 volunteers across Northern Ireland, contributes more than £2 million worth of work to the economy each year. It costs just over £1,000 to provide Home-Start support to a family for a year, and, compared with the cost of taking one child into care, it can support 40 children living at home.

LITE 60+, which is run by the Belfast Central Mission, costs approximately £50 a service user a week, compared with £430 for residential care and £570 for nursing care. Such projects enable vulnerable older people to continue to live in their own homes by providing them with services such as home security, benefit advice, shopping, food preparation and assistance with personal appearance and hygiene. The figures show that postponing entry into residential care by just one year saves £28 a person, and, more

importantly, it allows the older person to retain their independence and, quite often, their dignity.

The voluntary and community sector can also contribute to and strengthen social enterprise. For example, reference was made to the Bryson Charitable Group. It works with local councils, including my own in Carrickfergus, as a contractor for recyclable waste, and profits that are generated from its services are put back into maximising the environmental and social benefits that it provides.

I will take this opportunity to highlight a final example of the work of the third sector in my constituency. Seacourt is a mixed housing estate in Larne that has had a troubled profile in the past, both with interface and intra-community tensions. There was a waiting list of people who wished to leave the area. The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland invested some £200,000 in the area to develop new community structures to build community cohesion and invest in community leadership. As a result of the establishment of the Seacourt Community Council, the estate has won the best-kept large housing estate competition three times, through local people undertaking environmental projects and working with agencies to refurbish and re-let empty properties. Housing prices have improved, and there is now a waiting list for people wishing to move into the estate.

As I and many others have highlighted today, the voluntary and community sector plays a vital role in providing services to our community. Unfortunately, it is also too easy for Departments to target it as budget cuts kick in. Yet, in many ways, the recession calls for more services in the voluntary sector, rather than less. As unemployment rates continue to rise, and with welfare reform changes on their way, there is likely to be an increase in those needing quality advice and practical help, and the sector must be able to continue to provide those services. Tackling poverty —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close.

Mr Dickson: Therefore, we must ensure that the sector is adequately funded to provide its services. I am happy to support the motion.

Ms Lewis: I declare an interest as I sit on the management committee of Antrim citizens advice bureau. I welcome the opportunity to

speaking about the community and voluntary sector. I am well aware of the importance of the work that organisations in the sector carry out. They play a huge role, and it is one that is underestimated and not often appreciated. I am sure that other Members will mention the work of such organisations in their constituencies, and, no doubt, they will stress the importance of the sector to them.

As a Member for South Antrim, I want to mention two organisations in particular. In the past few years, I have worked closely with Women's Aid, and the services and support that it provides to women and children are invaluable. I have spent time hearing stories of countless women who have received support from Women's Aid. Their stories are often tragic, but the work that Women's Aid does has a massive positive impact on their lives. It has been there for them when they did not know who else to turn to. I understand how important its work is, and it provides support to the most vulnerable in society.

Home-Start, which other Members have mentioned, is another organisation in my constituency that provides help and support to families who need help in managing day-to-day life. Sometimes, families struggle to cope with managing everything, juggling jobs and home life. That is where Home-Start comes in, bringing relief to parents and help for children.

That is important work as it not only provides immediate help to those who need it but has long-lasting positive consequences that help to reduce problems for children later in life, the cost of which the public sector would have had to pick up. That organisation plays a valuable role and should also be recognised. I am happy to support today's motion because organisations such as those in my South Antrim constituency do a fantastic job, and it is important that the Assembly sends a message to the sector that its work is valued and appreciated.

4.15 pm

I note that the motion calls for organisations in the sector that provide public services to be fully funded. I support that, as long as it can be demonstrated that the sector can provide those services with value-added benefit. That has become an even more critical requirement given the financial and funding challenges that we now face. It is only natural that every organisation that provides a service believes that it is best placed to deliver that service

at the most reasonable cost to the public purse. Although that is true in many cases, it is perhaps fair to say that, in a crowded field, we must now take more time to evaluate the work of all organisations and the results that they achieve with the funding available.

As Northern Ireland seeks to build on the new political stability but against a backdrop of global financial uncertainty, we no longer have the luxury of providing funding to a whole host of groups that carry out similar roles in different communities simply because that is how it has always been. We must look at new ways of bringing communities and organisations together to deliver real change for all our most vulnerable and needy. I know that organisations such as Women's Aid and Home-Start will welcome the opportunity to demonstrate their continued value to our communities.

The motion also mentions the need to ensure effective working relationships between all Departments and the community and voluntary sector. I endorse that. However, the nature of the relationship and the key to a good working relationship has been set out in the concordat for relationships between government and the voluntary sector, which has been endorsed by the Executive. I support the concordat and the motion.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle agus a chairde. I rise in support of the motion. However, I was surprised when I heard that the Ulster Unionist Party had brought the motion, given its support for the Tory coalition and its anti-community, anti-people policies, especially in the shape of welfare reform legislation, which is the single biggest attack on communities and the poor in decades and is supported by the Ulster Unionists. However, I thank the Members for bringing the motion to the Floor for discussion.

The broad message and theme of the motion highlights the excellent work carried out by the voluntary and community sectors and calls for the Minister to ensure that an effective working relationship exists between government and the broad community sector. We are in a period where much uncertainty exists in the voluntary and community sectors about their future. Funding streams are drying up, and many groups do not know whether they will still be providing a service this time next year. The sector has never really been taken seriously by Departments even

though it provides a service for the most socially deprived and for those most at risk in society.

When you look at the briefing paper provided by our researchers and by NICVA, the biggest of all voluntary organisations, it is quite obvious that the community and voluntary sectors are big employers in the North. It is estimated that they employ 27,000 people, spend £544 million and that about 4,700 organisations provide a wide range of services to the wider community. That, in itself, is impressive but it does not take into consideration the spend that this money brings to communities and businesses across the North —

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: I am trying to get all this in. It does not take into consideration the spend that the money brings to communities and businesses across the North through services procured in the local economy and wages spent. We need to ask ourselves what our communities would be like if those services were not provided by the community and voluntary sectors and what it would cost for government to replicate the services provided by those groups. Would it be double or maybe triple the existing cost? No one can quantify the worth of the service provided by these sectors, yet, in many ways, they are not trusted by Departments and statutory agencies and are seen by some as an irritant that has to be dealt with. They have been vilified, audited to death and are often ignored and not seen as worthy of being brought into central planning when policy and strategy is being brought together.

Yet those people have many decades of experience in their field. "Partnership" has been a much-abused word that promised so much and offered a new way forward that was, by and large, ignored by Departments and statutory agencies which did not trust local organisations to make decisions about future programmes.

What about today? Well, today, things are every bit as bad. I recently attended a meeting with representatives of community sector groups and Departments, and the experience was painful. In one Department's case, no flexibility existed, but that was my experience of the same Department many years ago. That Department was the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). Many other Departments and statutory bodies do not fare any better. Some of the comments that I have heard recently across the sector have been about civil servants being

more interested in obtaining control and authority than building relationships on an equal footing, which was promised by neighbourhood renewal at its inception. Many feel that the adversarial policies and politics of the past between civil servants and the community sector are back on the agenda.

There are exceptions to that. I have worked with civil servants who are good at their job, professional in their approach and care for the many projects that they work in. A look at recent NISRA figures on deprivation shows that areas of severe deprivation are getting worse. Statutory intervention over decades simply has not worked. We may ask ourselves why. Had there been genuine partnership, firm relationships and a lot of trust between Departments, statutory agencies and the voluntary and community sector, I believe that we could have begun the hard work of dealing with generational deprivation.

To finish, some commentary from officials, individuals and some Ministers is that this is not about people protecting their jobs in the sector but the core programme: such people should get real. Without the jobs, the programme would not be delivered. That is an insult to those who work at the coalface of communities and deal with the most difficult issues. Many of them were there before the jobs existed. It is about the whole package — jobs and service.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Members who tabled the motion. Like many in the Chamber, I got involved in politics mainly as a result of voluntary and community development work over the years. That experience convinced me of the potential for positive change in society when people are mobilised and come together to influence decisions that affect their lives.

The motion is about recognising the hugely important role of the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland, and Members have pointed to excellent examples in their constituencies. Of the many that I could highlight in my East Belfast constituency I will speak briefly about the self-help initiative, Helping Hands, an autism support group that is located in the Tullycarnet estate less than two miles from here. The project was set up by local parents, most of them women, two years ago and provides much-needed practical help and support on a purely voluntary basis to around

50 families. The people on that committee carry out amazing work.

Helping Hands epitomises that aspect of the motion which asks that the Assembly “notes the invaluable contribution” of such groups. The motion highlights the need for adequate funding to support the sector, and today we welcome the announcement of the social investment fund, which has the potential to make a real impact in disadvantaged and depressed communities across Northern Ireland. In addition, Members should support the First Minister and deputy First Minister and our MEPs, such as Diane Dodds, in their tireless efforts to secure additional funding through a new Peace IV fund for Northern Ireland and the border counties.

The debate should not focus on grant funding alone. Many individuals in the community and voluntary sector have long recognised the need for sustainability, mainly through the social economy route. This is about safeguarding their future when funding inevitably runs out. I argue that my constituency has some of the best examples of social economy in Northern Ireland, most of them developed through the inspirational leadership of Maurice Kinkead, chief executive of East Belfast Partnership.

Initiatives such as Avalon House on the Newtownards Road, Bloomfield House at Holywood Arches, the Enler centre at Ballybeen and the Hanwood centre at Tullycarnet, to name but a few, have transformed local neighbourhoods and restored a sense of community pride and, importantly, those projects are generating income to employ staff and to fund other local community projects. Success in motion: for me, seeing is believing.

It is estimated that those projects and other social economy businesses in the pipeline — there are a number of developments taking place in east Belfast — represent an asset base of over £80 million for the community and voluntary sector there. Those assets have been used. It is not just about encouraging local development; it is about attracting private sector investment and bank loans to work on other initiatives. For me, that is self-help and community development in action.

While the Minister is here, I want to say that we have done all those things in east Belfast through a close working relationship with the Department for Social Development. It would not have happened without its intervention.

The motion calls on:

“the Minister for Social Development to ensure that there is an effective working relationship between all Executive Departments and the community and voluntary sector.”

We can all buy into that. However, I believe that the all-party group on the community and voluntary sector is the best model to take that forward. As a member of that group, I look forward to debating those issues at our next meeting. I support the motion.

Mr McCallister: The debate has been useful. We have heard about the work that Members are involved in with different local groups and committees in so many different parts of Northern Ireland to help regenerate those areas. Members help and contribute with their knowledge and work in a collective way with local communities to give them a boost, particularly at a difficult stage in the economic cycle.

I declare that I still have an interest in the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster, I am a trustee of Rathfriland Young Farmers' Club and a member of Rathfriland Regeneration Committee — like everyone else. I will not bore everyone to death with the list of activities. However, it is good for Members and councillors to be involved in those activities and put something important back into the community.

Picking up on some of the issues raised, the debate was all going terribly well until Mr McCann attacked our Conservative friends. When I am in Manchester next week, I will pass on his comments.

I hope that the Minister will address some of the issues raised. Mr Douglas touched on the social investment fund. We are so far through the financial year now, and we are concerned about whether that money is going to be used up. How is the Minister going to get that money to community and voluntary sectors — the front line — where it is needed and can be most effective?

All Members have described the work of the community and voluntary sectors in their different areas and constituencies and what they can add to society. Community and voluntary groups make an enormous contribution right across the spectrum of public services, and it is true that we sometimes take that for granted. We often underestimate the contribution that our community and voluntary sectors make in education and health and in people giving up

their time and talents to volunteer. We also underestimate the benefits that that brings, not only to those they help but to those who volunteer from right across the spectrum. It helps to make a difference to those who retrain and to those who just enjoy putting something back into the community.

Mr Easton has returned to the House, and I will pick up on his point about the big society.

The rest of the UK should look at the Northern Ireland model to see how we live with the big society, what it means and how they could deliver it.

4.30 pm

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

In his opening remarks my colleague Mr Beggs talked about the contribution that the community and voluntary sector makes to health. Health simply could not deliver all that it does without the community and voluntary sector — it could not afford to. Many of those groups can delve into and help communities with issues that the statutory sector cannot reach. The community and voluntary sector has a great impact on education and health. Furthermore, in justice, the Jobtrack partnership between the Probation Service and NIACRO has managed almost to halve reoffending rates from nearly 43% to 24%. That is making a real difference. It is not just about getting people involved and active; it is about seeing real benefits and improving outcomes in people's lives. That is where the community and voluntary sector can make such a difference, and improving outcomes for people who most need help from the government and who work to achieve it is the measure that we should always look for.

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

Mr McCallister: That is where they can make the biggest impact. I am interested to hear the Minister's remarks on the social investment fund.

Mr Hamilton: Having listened to Members from virtually every part of Northern Ireland talk about their personal experiences with community and voluntary groups in their constituencies, one cannot deny the size, scale and impact of the sector. It is clear that, across Northern Ireland, many community and voluntary sector organisations work day in and day out with some of the most vulnerable people in society.

During my tenure as Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, as well as in my constituency capacity, I have had many interactions with community and voluntary sector groups, and one thing that comes forward is that there is a feeling that they are sometimes underappreciated and receive little praise and acknowledgement for their work. Therefore, if nothing else, today's debate gives us an opportunity to put on record our thanks and praise for their work and to acknowledge their great contribution to Northern Ireland society.

Despite that perception, their contribution is recognised by the Government at Stormont, and the concordat puts that appreciation into words. I hope that the Minister robustly enforces that across government in Northern Ireland. Such appreciation is also manifest in the confidence exhibited by the public sector in asking community and voluntary sector organisations to deliver services on its behalf for the people of Northern Ireland. That is not done in any way as a favour to the community and voluntary sector. It is not a matter of giving services to the sector to keep it occupied; it is done, as Mr Maginness outlined, because the type of people with whom the community and voluntary sector invariably works are hard to reach geographically or, on policy issues, by the public sector. I am talking about delivering on health, education and skills issues to any number of hard-to-reach communities in Northern Ireland, both geographically and demographically, including people with mental illness, the elderly and those dealing with suicide issues. Everyone in this place, no matter how wonderful we think we are, must recognise that there is a panoply of issues with which the community and voluntary sector often deals but with which the government cannot deal as effectively.

These days, most debates focus on funding. However, at a time of very difficult budgetary circumstances, the Executive should be looking for opportunities to expand service delivery on behalf of the public sector by the voluntary and community sector, because, what often happens is that not just are they reaching vulnerable sections in society, they are doing so to a very high standard and at great value for money.

In these austere times, we should all be mindful of value for money as a watchword. We should be looking at opportunities to expand the sort of service delivery that the community and voluntary sector provides on behalf of the public

sector. As well as touching on good examples of community and voluntary organisations, we could all also give examples of where we have seen the fear manifest itself that the centre will seek to protect itself by passing on the ill effects of the downturn to everyone, including the community and voluntary sector.

In spite of the fact that we should seek to expand, if possible, the work that represents value for money, which is that done by the community and voluntary sector on our behalf, no one, not least that sector, should be immune from what is going on. That lack of immunity is being shown in some of the cutbacks that it is experiencing.

Mr A Maginness: Your last point is important. I do not think that the sector would object to cuts per se. The important point is that those cuts must be proportionate to its capacity.

Mr Hamilton: I agree with the Member. In fact, when I was Chair of the Committee for Social Development, a session on the Budget, which we held at the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), involved about 80 groups from the sector. The point that I wanted to get across to them, which was reiterated by the Finance Minister during the Budget process, was that the sector should not be singled out or targeted in any way for disproportionate cuts.

The sector must look at itself critically, and I know that, in many regards, it already does so. It must ask whether the existence of so many community and voluntary organisations in Northern Ireland is appropriate and whether some that were established many years ago, with the best of intentions, are still fit for purpose and delivering. There must be that sense of introspection across the sector, so that it can survive the downturn and consequent cutbacks in public expenditure and emerge more strongly than it would without such critical self-examination. Indeed, the Assembly and the Executive must also do that on behalf of government. Some work on that front is ongoing in the sector, but it is not simply a matter of giving it more money. As Mr Douglas said, the sector must look at how it can make itself more sustainable, perhaps through a social enterprise model, to ensure that it will be there into the future delivering —

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

Mr Hamilton: — the high standards to which we have become accustomed.

Mr Agnew: I thank the proposers for tabling the motion. Before I worked in the Assembly, originally for Brian Wilson and now as an elected Member in my own right, my background was in the community and voluntary sector, mainly working with the homeless. When a motion such as this is debated, it gives me the opportunity to reflect on the importance of the community and voluntary sector's work and the dedication of the people who work in it. I worked with the homeless for five years, at the end of which, largely because of the stress and pressure of that type of work, I chose to leave the sector. However, I am aware of many others who dedicate their lives to working on behalf of other people and to protecting and supporting the most vulnerable. Despite the personal toll it may take on their lives, they put the needs of others before their own. It is important that we recognise that today. It was interesting to hear Sammy Douglas talk about some of the work going on at Ballybeen. As a young person growing up there, I availed myself of some of those services. It is good to hear that work being recognised. Largely, that work goes on day and daily without the appropriate value being attributed to it.

The sector as a whole plays an important role in innovation. A lot of services that exist today, particularly social services, would find their genesis in the community and voluntary sector. Alban Maginness mentioned the work of the Green New Deal Coalition. I hope that that will become another example of a funded statutory programme with its genesis in the community and voluntary sector.

The sector has the flexibility to meet the needs of people who are falling through the net, which, sometimes, the public sector lacks, due to its size. I think back to my time when I worked in the homeless sector. I worked with young people who were coming out of care or juvenile justice centres. Our education services were, perhaps, not able to fit around the transitional nature of those people's lives. However, there were always voluntary sector services providing community education that fitted around the young people, rather than expecting them to fit into an inflexible mass model.

Yesterday, we had a debate on youth justice. That is another example of where the ingenuity

often comes from the community and voluntary sector. Look at the early intervention strategies in youth justice and the championing work of the likes of NIACRO. They are very important in moving statutory services forward by providing the evidence base. Perhaps those involved in a small pilot scheme can say, "We have done it; it works here. Now, can you expand it throughout the statutory sector?"

It would be remiss of me not to mention some of the charities operating in my constituency. Unfortunately, I did not hear Mr Easton's contribution. I have no doubt that he mentioned Kilcooley Women's Centre. *[Interruption.]* Did he not? Well, I will mention it, because it does excellent work. I know a number of people who avail themselves of its services. I have to give special mention to Positive Futures, a now region-wide charity that was set up and founded in Bangor. It does excellent work with people with learning difficulties. It was the drive and ambition of Agnes Lunny that set up that charity. I know that it provides excellent support to complement the statutory services. It is important that Departments see these services as complementary and that work is done together. Given the cuts, the sector has had to make more strenuous efforts to work together and to ensure that there is not duplication of services. It is important that government works with groups to support them in that. Perhaps the final piece of the jigsaw is the next step of Departments working together more efficiently.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr Agnew: I will leave it there.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I welcome the motion, as it gives me the opportunity to reaffirm the significant contribution that the voluntary and community sector makes to civic society in Northern Ireland. If I may, I will address the important issues raised in the motion in reverse order, so that I can show how policy development leads through to action.

It is appropriate that the motion has been tabled to the Assembly. As a Minister in the previous Executive, I, like my colleagues at the time, approved the new concordat for relations between government and the sector in Northern Ireland. The concordat is the shared vision of government and the voluntary and community sector working together in partnership. It is shaped so that they can work together to build

a more participative, peaceful, equitable and inclusive society in Northern Ireland, and it has been operational since April of this year. The concordat provides the foundations for partnership working, based on respect and mutual trust, and it offers opportunities for active participation by the sector in developing public policy. It creates the framework that supports greater co-operation, collaborative working, modernisation, smarter and different funding mechanisms, and it reduces the administrative burden. The concordat provides the platform for other policy issues and support arrangements, such as volunteering and advice services in DSD and across government. I intend to ensure that it is implemented robustly.

Although I am responsible for policy matters as lead Minister for the voluntary and community sector, that does not mean that I can or want to deal with all matters relating to the sector. My ministerial colleagues have developed relationships that relate to the business of their own Departments. For instance, many in the sector work closely with Edwin Poots and his officials in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; Arlene Foster has the social economy remit, which is an agenda that I very much want to support; and, as the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Sammy Wilson has a particular interest in dormant accounts, which, as Members may know, he has been considering in recent days. The First Minister and deputy First Minister's interaction with the sector is also considerable, and others have similar engagement, whether it is in the arena of the environment, education, employment, skills development, culture, sports or leisure.

4.45 pm

We in government very much realise the importance of the voluntary and community sector to our society. The sector employs some 29,000 people across 4,500 organisations, with many more thousands involved in a voluntary capacity. Some £260 million of the sector's income of £570 million comes from government to enable them to deliver public services on behalf of, or in partnership with, government.

As the lead Minister for the sector, I see my role as being to advocate on the sector's behalf across government when the need arises. My role is to support the sector and to make sure that the needs and contributions of the sector are recognised at the Executive. That is why

I attach such importance to the concordat as the policy instrument that will help us to achieve that. I will continue to ensure that my Department adds value by convening others to share ideas and good practice, and that includes social economy organisations. My Department has particular responsibility for helping to support the infrastructure or the skills and capacities that are needed in the sector, and it spends up to £15 million each year in such assistance.

In the last few weeks, I have held detailed discussions in the Department on future arrangements for the regional infrastructure support programme and for the support of other thematic policy areas, including volunteering, advice services, women in disadvantaged areas and faith sector engagement. I have instructed my officials to ensure that funding is distributed on the basis of clearly evidenced need for clearly demonstrable outcomes that are closely aligned to my Department's policy objectives and that it is carefully evaluated. A number of Members referred to those points in their contributions.

My party has made no secret of its interest in looking at social impact bonds and alternative finance sources, including philanthropic sources, and in helping voluntary and community organisations to ease their dependency on government grants. The issue of sustainability was raised by a number of Members, and we must support organisations as they try to become more self-sustainable.

I appreciate that many thousands of organisations operate on an entirely voluntary basis without any recourse to public funds. That is particularly true in a number of areas and especially in the faith sector. In those circumstances, it would be inappropriate of me to force mergers or to insist on collaboration; that is entirely a matter for those organisations. However, it is a very different story when public money is involved. That is why the Department for Social Development did so much to light the touchpaper of modernisation, bidding for and administering the modernisation fund and using that fund to help support collaboration and the sharing of services. Since I came into office, I have seen examples of that, such as Omagh Community House, where many voluntary organisations share space and overhead costs while delivering many services to their community. It was clear when we met the

different organisations there that there was a synergy and a sense of mutual support as those organisations worked in the same building. DSD has also provided assistance to the Building Change Trust to drive forward work on mergers and collaborations, and it has welcomed the work that is being done by NICVA to help organisations to collaborate. It is important that that work continues.

Neighbourhood renewal provides a vehicle for engagement across government to take forward measures to tackle disadvantage. In the most deprived communities, it provides a flexible, local mechanism for statutory agencies to work together with local residents and voluntary community groups. Efforts to regenerate the most deprived neighbourhoods must be based on real partnerships, both within and between communities and with government. To that end, each neighbourhood partnership was to be representative of key political, statutory, voluntary, community and private sector stakeholders.

As Minister, I lead a cross-departmental ministerial group which takes forward the work on neighbourhood renewal. Its most important role is to ensure that all parts of government remain committed to the purpose and delivery of neighbourhood renewal by continually reviewing work in the most deprived neighbourhoods.

For those groups receiving revenue funding, including via the neighbourhood renewal investment fund, a new funding approach was introduced in April 2011 that seeks to maximise the impact of available resources by reducing overheads and duplication. Where projects were working well, producing results and providing value for money, they were offered funding for up to four years from April 2011. As Social Development Minister, I have agreed to invest more than £20 million each year in the neighbourhood renewal programme.

The principle that voluntary and community organisations must be able to include full overhead costs related to delivering a contracted service is one that I endorse and it is also supported by Her Majesty's Treasury and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). As part of a concordat implementation process, we are committed to work with others to develop proposals for imbedding full-cost recovery within contractual arrangements between public sector and voluntary and community sector organisations.

I realise, from the contributions made to this debate, that we all recognise and believe in the value of the voluntary and community sector, and we have heard examples and experiences from constituencies across the Province. My Department is fully focused on supporting vulnerable people, the most needy in society, and we work in partnership with the sector in delivering social, economic, cultural and environmental improvement in Northern Ireland. To support that, over £60 million is spent each year on the Supporting People programme. Additional capital and revenue funding has been secured for the next comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, totalling £128 million, to take forward schemes for people with mental health problems.

As lead Department for relations with the voluntary and community sector, I assure you that I am fully committed to support the most vulnerable, improving quality of lives and ensuring access to services. We all cannot fail to recognise that the current economic climate has had an impact on communities. As unemployment continues to rise, so does the number of those seeking benefits and requiring advice. We have many people dependent on benefits; proportionately more here compared to the rest of the UK. Tackling the poverty problem, and the proposed changes to welfare reform being taken forward at Westminster, will be significant challenges to us all. I commit my officials to engage constructively with representative organisations on issues such as universal credit, social fund reform and personal independence payment.

The role of lead Minister requires clear leadership in helping to raise some of the tough and sensitive issues that confront us all when funding becomes limited. It is all very well to say that we prioritise the front line. The question is this: what does that mean in practice? What is the minimum infrastructure that we need to support to help the sector flourish? How, in practice, do we help voluntary organisations reduce dependency on government? Those are the questions that I want to focus on over the next while.

I will pick up on a number of points that Members have made. Some points I have already addressed; I will not return to them and I hope that the Members who made them will accept that. Mickey Brady referred on several occasions to the address that I gave at a NICVA conference on 8 September. That was an opportunity to set

out directly to the sector, and to engage with folk in the question and answer session, our vision for the voluntary and community sector over the next number of years. I found that very helpful, and those who were at the conference also found it helpful in setting out clearly where we stand.

Unsurprisingly, Alban Maginness was somewhat critical when he said that the Government have not responded to the green new deal effectively. However, I assure the Member that we are still waiting for the business case for the green new deal. I am sure that the Member has been here long enough to know that unless there is a business case for something it cannot proceed. As soon as we get the business case, we will look at it very carefully. It has been promised on several occasions; it has still not arrived, but I look forward to receiving it with interest.

Stewart Dickson spoke about value for money. He is absolutely right. We need to look at organisations to see those that are really delivering value for money — there are many of them — and to see areas where there is a weakness and where value is not being delivered.

Fra McCann referred to the cuts that were imposed on us by the coalition Government — those whom John McCallister described as our Conservative friends. He also spoke about the sometimes difficult relationship between Departments and the sector. That is where the concordat comes into play. We need to see the concordat robustly implemented.

John McCallister told us that he is a member of the Young Farmers' Clubs, and I discovered that the word "young" is obviously very flexible. He also referred to the social investment fund. I wish to inform the Member — I am sure that he will take this to heart — that the matter is being taken forward by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) not DSD. We have a role to play, as will other Departments, but the lead Department is OFMDFM. With the launch of the consultation paper today, I am sure that the Member will take the opportunity to respond to OFMDFM on that.

Mr Hamilton: Not to DSD.

Mr McCausland: Not to DSD. That is absolutely right. Steven Agnew spoke about the need to avoid duplication. That is something that we are very keen on. We want to get the maximum impact. At a time of financial constraint, which

has been imposed on us by Mr McCallister's friends in the Conservative Party, it is important that we ensure that we have value for money. Therefore, we will work with the sector to ensure that that happens.

I will close by saying that I am proud to be the Minister for voluntary and community organisations that are effective in achieving their missions, collaborative in working with Government and one another to tackle need, able to demonstrate the impact of their work not to me but to the communities of which they are part, and trusted and deliberate in working with my Department and with others for the public good.

Mr F McCann: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It was remiss of me not to declare an interest when I spoke that I am a member of a number of community organisations in west Belfast.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is very good of you. I call Mr Michael Copeland to conclude and wind up the debate on the motion.

Mr Copeland: I, too, must declare an interest in — to borrow a phrase from Mr McCann — a number of community and voluntary organisations in east Belfast. This is not the first occasion on which I have been asked to wind up; however, it is the first occasion on which I have been asked to wind up a debate, and I will perform the duty to the best of my ability. However, I ask for Members' forbearance.

This is an important issue, and we have to look at the information that we use in order to decide what we are going to do. My belief is that, at some stage, we need the publication of the full register of charities, for example, so that we will know how many organisations actually exist in the sector. The absence of compulsory registration makes it difficult to determine accurately the number of groups involved. However, I have no doubt at all that the statistics that Members quoted today are accurate. I would like to use this opportunity when we have the Minister present to urge respectfully that he attempt to find a quick resolution to the public benefit dispute in the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008. It is an issue that has been dragging on for a long time, and there are organisations in the community and voluntary sector that are unsure of what their new or current legal obligations may be.

I would appreciate it if the Minister would bear those remarks in mind.

5.00 pm

I am sure that I am not the only Member in the Chamber who has concerned groups coming to them to say that they are genuinely afraid that they will see their resources cut, not because of the effect that that cut in resources will have on them but because of the effect that it will have on the communities that they seek to serve and the issues that they seek to address. Some of them have a feeling, which may or may not be real, that they are seen as a soft touch or an easy target by Departments seeking to rejig spending. I hope that the magnanimous and unanimous views expressed by all parties around the Chamber today will go some way towards allowing them to understand that we seriously understand their requirements and anxiously and earnestly seek to address them.

As the Health Minister said in his statement earlier, the community and voluntary sector makes an important contribution not only to the things that we know about but to other things such as providing services and assisting the health and social care sector to find solutions to difficult issues. Be it the former alcoholic helping others to fight their battle against drink or the students supporting a local youth club, volunteering builds a sense of trust and understanding. The fact that people freely and without expectation of reward — certainly not in this life — give of their time, effort and skills solely for the benefit of others is not unique to these islands, but it almost is.

Another point that needs to be and has been made and stressed is that local groups sometimes know how to do things better than large government organisations. Their driving force and will to do things make them do those things all the better and, generally, less expensively. It, therefore, follows that, if those groups continue to feel undervalued, whether or not they actually are, and to fear that their resources will be cut, even greater pressure will be put on them. The motion calls on the Minister for Social Development to ensure that there are effective working relationships in the community and voluntary sector. There is hardly a Department or public body in Northern Ireland that does not deal or interface with or have knowledge of some of those groups. However, there is need

for improved co-operation and co-ordination across all Departments and public bodies.

As I listened carefully to what Members said in the debate, I tried to distil the essence, rather than the totality, of what they said by taking one key word from each contribution, in the hope that an analysis of those key words would subsequently give an overall view of what has taken place here. In a very good opening speech, Roy Beggs stressed the word “need”. No one in the Chamber believes for one second that we live in a society where need is not relevant or important. Mickey Brady, who has a long history in the field, used the word “value”, which is about how we look at and hold an object and where we place that object in relation to other things. Alex Easton used the word “dedicated”. It is a notion that someone will not be detracted or put off from doing something that they believe to be right.

Alban Maginness used the word “partnership”. What is possible in this life without partnership? Whether we in the Chamber hold hands and dance around daisy chains does not matter. There is an effective partnership here, in which we are all involved, be it the partnership at home, which is the foundation of the family; the partnership of convivial company; or the partnership of people who will not lie down and accept something that they know is less than what they can otherwise have.

Mr Dickson used the word “cohesion”, which is about sticking together, the inability to be separated, and the refusal to be broken off or hived off. Pam Lewis spoke well. She used the word “aid”, which means help and assistance — what people seek when things go against them. Fra McCann introduced a note of surprise, which was surprising. He said that the situation was getting worse. He went on to examine the past links between my party and damage to people, which was, perhaps, even more surprising.

Sammy Douglas, from East Belfast, used the word “positive”, which describes the refusal to lie down in the face of adversity. He mentioned Helping Hands — a group that I know well — Hanwood Trust and the East Belfast Partnership. Their work goes on day and daily behind the scenes to occasion change. Generally, they do not appear in newspaper headlines, nor are they mentioned in dispatches. Without their work, however, society would be a much poorer place.

John McCallister used the word “contribution”, among others. That is what each of us, corporately and individually, can bring to the table for the benefit of other people. Simon Hamilton mentioned “delivering”. We hear much about that in government. It is a mysterious thing; we really do not know what it means. However, we know when it does not work. In the case of the community and voluntary sector, it does work. Steven Agnew mentioned “innovation”, which means thinking outside the box and refusing to be bound by past principles or experience. It is the notion that the situation can be changed because somebody dares to say that it can be different.

All of those words sum up and distil the essence of the debate. I hope that people in the community and voluntary sector take heart from what has been said. The most important words were those of the Minister. He used such words as “shared vision”, “inclusive”, “mutual trust”, “modernisation” and “value”. Most important, he said that he was fully committed. In that statement, he must deserve the support and congratulations of the entire House. I hope that he will take what Members have said to his Executive colleagues, because many people in the sector need just that little lift.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the invaluable contribution made by the community and voluntary sector, particularly in assisting the most vulnerable people in society; believes that where the sector provides public services, it is appropriate that it should be adequately funded for this provision and any related overhead costs; and calls upon the Minister for Social Development to ensure that there is an effective working relationship between all Executive Departments and the community and voluntary sector.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Broadband: Greencastle and Other Parts of West Tyrone

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. The Minister will have 10 minutes to respond. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately six minutes.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In February 2008, I tabled an Adjournment debate on broadband access in rural parts of west Tyrone. Today, I do so again. At that time, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment was Nigel Dodds. On this occasion, the Minister with that responsibility is, of course, Arlene Foster. It is not her responsibility alone, although she holds that portfolio. I welcome the fact that she is in attendance for the Adjournment debate.

The Minister will know that, in my capacity as an MLA for West Tyrone, I organised a public meeting in Greencastle. The Adjournment topic specifies a rural area called Greencastle, which is in the Omagh district. It refers to other rural parts of west Tyrone. That will resonate with other Members and their constituencies. I am sure that the Minister knows that I organised that public meeting in Greencastle on Wednesday 22 June 2011. It was a very well attended meeting, to which there was a huge local public response. From the officials’ side, the meeting was attended by representatives from Minister Foster’s Department, Alberta Pauley and Bill Stevenson from the telecommunications policy unit. BT attended in the form of Michael Speers, senior wholesale broadband manager. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development was represented, as was North West Electronics by Scott McClelland. When I organised that meeting, I was essentially fulfilling an election promise to people in the area. During the Assembly election campaign, this was definitely the biggest single issue that came up on the doorsteps in that rural part of West Tyrone.

In the February 2008 Adjournment debate, I said:

“Information and communication technologies have become part of our everyday lives. These days, broadband is crucial for high-speed Internet connection to emails; for research; for booking flights or concert tickets; for downloading photographs, music or videos; for interactive entertainment; for the delivery of Government services; for assisting with young people’s homework; and for anyone else involved in lifelong learning. Broadband is crucial for everyone, including the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in efforts to increase the competitiveness of local businesses and to boost business productivity.” — [Official Report, Bound Volume 27, p348, col 1].

Obviously, that is still the case. Before coming to this debate, I spoke to people in the Greencastle community, who have very strong views on the issue after experiencing the deficit of broadband access. One of them said to me that the Government have made it compulsory for businesses to complete PAYE returns online. That will also apply to VAT returns from April 2012. The same person said that DETI had approved Avanti Communications, North West Electronics and other companies for wireless broadband but that that can be an intermittent supply and be unreliable and more expensive. Some people I spoke to said that they go to the public library for access to the internet. However, data protection is an issue there when one is making returns of the sort that I mentioned.

In July and August in the Greencastle community alone — a small, rural community in County Tyrone — the local community carried out a survey. There are 80 to 100 registered small businesses, two thirds of which said that they had no broadband coverage. It is a very entrepreneurial area. That small community also has 100 farmers, who are obliged to register the births and deaths of animals online and are encouraged to do a lot of their other business online, such as applications for grants and single farm payments.

More recently, we have learnt that the regional college in Omagh is holding a virtual learning week, where everything is done online and at a distance. Obviously, the students from the areas that I am talking about are totally disadvantaged and, indeed, excluded from that process. That is one of the reasons that the local community is seeking a meeting with Minister Stephen Farry, who has responsibility for employment and learning. It is everyone’s business and every

Department’s business, not just DETI’s. We have also raised the issue in the Employment and Learning Committee.

The Rural Community Network also says that, in response to any of its consultations about the draft rural White Paper, poor broadband and poor mobile phone coverage are consistent complaints from rural dwellers. Therefore, to add to the evidence base, the Rural Community Network is saying that it is consistently and constantly hearing those complaints when it goes out and about to consult rural communities.

5.15 pm

A key question is how the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment believes broadband will be delivered to rural communities, some of them remote, when the decision is very often left firmly in the hands of a commercial entity. I want to thank senior BT people such as Frank McManus and George Fitzpatrick, who have worked well with the local community, in particular since the meeting in June. They met subcommittees of the campaign group to discuss quite complex technical issues, and it is my understanding that there will be another meeting with local campaign subgroups in October. I believe that Frank McManus holds the portfolio of broadband manager and George Fitzpatrick is, I think, the senior network planner.

This matter is of huge interest to people in rural communities because, very often, people cannot access courses at their local regional college or carry out their day-to-day business activities or farming business transactions. The issue speaks for itself. The Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN), an amalgam of, I think, 12 councils north and south of the border, has a telecommunications working group. They, too, have identified this as a major issue. In addition, five district councils west of the Bann came together, chaired by Cookstown councillor Sean Clarke, to produce a document. That was a five-council approach to spelling out the telecommunications issues west of the Bann in four councils in County Tyrone and one in County Fermanagh.

There is a huge evidence base, which will not be unfamiliar to the current Minister. I am simply lobbying on behalf of rural communities who still feel that they are being left behind. Investment has been welcome but, to date, has been inadequate.

Mr Buchanan: I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate. First, I welcome the good work that has been done by the Minister's Department on seeking to increase the speed of broadband and to get it into as many rural areas as possible through next generation broadband and other mechanisms. I know that the Department has put a good bit of finance into upgrading broadband and seeking to increase the speeds.

There is no doubt that broadband technology is used by many people in rural areas. As time goes on and technology develops, it seems that ever more people are beginning to depend on broadband. Some of that dependency was outlined by the Member who spoke previously with regard to small businesses, farmers and the unemployed, who are seeking to find a job through the internet. A lot of work done by young people in the education system is done via the internet.

There is a wide range of people in rural areas who are depending more on broadband. That increases the challenge of getting broadband into all rural areas. We have to be realistic in that there are still pockets of rural areas that cannot receive broadband. I am sure that we all get people from rural areas coming to our offices and making the complaint or raising the concern that they still cannot access broadband or the internet or that it is too slow. Perhaps some of them cannot get it at all.

We have been able to direct some people to other providers through North West Electronics. Once again, it works for some people but not for all. Although there are other options, it simply does not work for everyone. There are pockets in West Tyrone and, I am sure, in many other rural constituencies where broadband cannot be accessed.

When next generation broadband came about, the cabinet boxes were upgraded and people were told about this faster broadband, many people in rural communities felt that it was a godsend. However, it did not turn out how they expected, and some people were disappointed. That was down to the way in which BT advertised the new system. BT's advertisement stated that if people joined up to the new broadband system, they would get unlimited broadband of up to eight megabytes per second. BT did not go on to say that it might not benefit people living a mile or two away from the exchange in the same way.

It has benefited a number of people, who are appreciative of it. However, that is not the case for people who are further away. One constituent is continually on my back about the issue. That person lives in a rural area and was receiving 2.5 megabytes per second. The constituent saw the BT advertisement, signed up to it and can now get only one megabyte per second. I can assure you that I am really getting it on the back about this issue. There are still areas on which we need to concentrate. I am not quite sure how we get broadband into those areas. It is a challenge, and we have to look at it.

The Agriculture Committee is looking at the issue. I note that, in one of the consultations, it was suggested that we should look at the use of satellite broadband. That has proved successful in many countries with a more extensive rural area than Northern Ireland, one example being India. Perhaps that could be considered to see whether there is some way to get broadband into pockets in rural areas that are still unable to access it.

People are still raising concerns that they are being forgotten about and that, although other people can access broadband, they cannot. It is a challenge. I commend the Minister on what she has done and for increasing the speed of broadband in rural areas. However, I have to lay down a marker and say that there are still areas in rural communities that do not have it. We have to see what we can do to provide broadband in those areas.

Mr Byrne: I congratulate Barry McElduff on bringing forward this issue once again. He referred to the fact that the issue has been debated in the House on a number of occasions. I do not want to repeat the overall context and the technical issues relating to broadband. All I can say is that broadband is still a very vexed issue in many rural parts of west Tyrone and other parts of the North, including south Down. Many small businesses and private households are left frustrated and badly disadvantaged by not having access to the web network or the internet.

A number of debates on the issue have taken place here previously. DETI has been aware of the broadband problems experienced by many rural people. BT has enjoyed many contracts to supply broadband networks. I have to say that I am concerned that BT has a number of lucrative contracts but has not delivered. I appeal to the Minister and her Department to revisit the

assurances or otherwise and the contractual obligations or otherwise of BT in relation to providing broadband services.

BT has been a double-edged sword as regards the provision, or lack, of broadband services for many people. As Thomas Buchanan said, many BT advertisements boast about its broadband service across the North. That is not the experience of many BT customers, despite its “Infinity” advert.

I will share the experience of the Kelly family of Whitebridge Road in Carrickmore. I received a phone call six weeks ago from the parents of two university students doing dissertations. They were deeply frustrated, as they were dependent on broadband. When the system went down, they got a phone call from a BT official saying that they were sorry, but the service was being cut off as quality of delivery could no longer be guaranteed, even though those people had a contract for the service with BT. That manner of ending the service was a bit like a summary execution.

As Tom Buchanan said, we have been told since that BT relaid some cabling and installed a service box in the area, but it seems that the new cabling is not of as good a quality or as effective as previous cabling. Nevertheless, those people had a service, they no longer have that service and now they have to look for an alternative.

North West Electronics and a company called Meganet based locally in Omagh have been very good at trying to meet the needs of local people who want a broadband service. However, unfortunately, when the broadband service that comes through the BT wires goes down, there is nobody from BT available to deal with the frustrated caller who wants the service reconnected. Often it is North West Electronics, Meganet or other small broadband service companies who are asked to intervene and deal with the problem.

I want to pay tribute to North West Electronics, which has a contract to supply a wireless broadband service known as the WIMAX system. It is proving effective for many of the scattered rural neighbourhoods that feed off some of the BT boxes. That is proving beneficial in many parts. The Castlederg and Aghayarn areas have enjoyed better broadband coverage, and, as Barry said earlier, the Dregish area is now

enjoying a better service. Hopefully that will also extend to the Greencastle area.

However, given that we still have broadband black spots, I appeal to the Minister and her officials to get this fixed. This is a small place; there are only six counties and 1.7 million people. We are at the forefront of technology here. Why can we not have a quality high-speed broadband service throughout the North?

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue. I have been a councillor for a number of years and now, as an MLA, I know that this is one issue that we hear of through our constituency offices on an almost daily basis.

I, too, thank the Minister for her commitment to improving broadband services in rural areas through the NI broadband fund. She has done that in a number of areas in the West Tyrone constituency, and I pay tribute to her for that. Councillor Kieran McGuire has asked me to particularly mention his area of Aghayarn and Killeter, where people have experienced difficulties in accessing broadband for a number of years. There have been many problems, which other Members have alluded to, so I will not go over them again.

My predecessor, Claire McGill, worked very hard for her constituents on broadband issues, as the Minister will be aware. She had numerous face-to-face meetings with BT to no avail. Another example of where there are problems is her area of Glenelly. A councillor from that area, Dan Kelly, asked me to point out that there are still issues in the Plumbridge, Dunnamanagh and Aghabrack areas. There are still people without access to broadband, including farmers with small rural enterprises, and domestic homes.

5.30 pm

One issue involves a small post office in a rural area that had no broadband access for a long time — six months. People in the area were not able to avail of the post office card accounts because of the broadband issue, so they were not able to pay for their TV licence or electricity and had to travel a number of miles to do so. In a rural area, not everyone has transport, particularly the elderly, so that, in itself, presented problems. Although we talk about farmers, domestic homes and all of that, there is an issue in some areas about paying bills. As my colleague Joe Byrne said, BT has done some

good work, but there is still a lot of work to be done in that area.

I also congratulate North West Electronics and Meganet in my own area, which had to come along and clean up after BT in many instances. In the Clady area of Strabane, there was a box put in, but it was six months before it was up and running and actually started to work. It had teething problems, and some constituents contacted my office to say that they were having to pay for the service but were getting nothing from it. Thankfully, that has now been rectified, but it took six months. I appeal to the Minister to look at BT's commitment to providing broadband to the people of west Tyrone. As I said earlier, I congratulate North West Electronics and Meganet for their work and their endeavours to upgrade what they have provided to customers.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I am pleased to be here to respond to the debate, although when I looked at Sinn Féin's website earlier today I wondered if there was much point in me coming here this afternoon, because Mr McElduff's speech was already on the website at 12.00 noon. I think it is a gross disrespect to the House to have his speech on the website before we have even had the debate. That is something that I will take up —

Mr McElduff: Here is my speech. I must show you it. It consists of hand-written notes. I spoke ad-lib. There may have been a press release issued about the broadband deficit in west Tyrone, but I think the Minister misses the point.

Mrs Foster: The Minister does not miss the point: the Minister has the evidence before her.

I will move on to the issue of broadband. As Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I want to see all of Northern Ireland enjoying the benefits of the high-quality telecommunications system that we have in Northern Ireland. In that context, this debate is an important opportunity to talk about the rural areas.

As Mr McElduff has pointed out, we have had debates on the issue before. As he mentioned, in February 2008 he secured a debate on the issue. As Ms Boyle pointed out, I met with the former MLA Claire McGill in January 2011, when we had a very useful meeting to discuss some specific issues. Then, just three weeks ago, we met a delegation from Cookstown District Council to discuss provision in that area. Mr Clarke, who was referred to by Mr McElduff, was

present at that meeting as well. My officials also attended a public meeting in Greencastle on the evening of 22 June this year, which, I understand, was very well attended, as Mr McElduff pointed out, and very lively, to use the euphemistic phrase.

I am surprised that concerns continue to be expressed about broadband provision in the area. It seems to me that there is a great deal of confusion about broadband access in those areas, and, indeed, about broadband generally. I want to deal with those issues.

In particular, I want to say to Mr Byrne that he should write to BT with the precise details of any specific issues that he wishes to raise with that organisation. I am not here to defend any of the broadband companies that have received contracts from the Department, and there have been many. I will go through them now, but BT has not only met all its targets, it has well exceeded them. I am quite happy to give the Department's evidence to the Member, which shows how BT has performed against the terms of its contracts. It is important to say that, because if Members are going to attack an organisation that has provided broadband access across Northern Ireland, exceeding the targets that were set by the company, we need to know where the misinformation is coming from, and I need to be able to tell BT where Members are saying that it is falling down. I look forward to receiving the Member's evidence so that I can bring it to BT and challenge them about it.

As we all know, and it has been said many times in this House, telecommunications is a reserved matter. The UK telecommunications market is fully privatised and regulated nationally and independently of government by Ofcom. Mr McElduff made a point about mobile phone coverage. He knows that I have been trying to get Ofcom to deal with the issues of 3G and 4G coverage. We have national targets for 3G coverage, but we need regional targets, because we have very poor mobile phone coverage at the moment. The companies are able to meet their targets nationally without coming to Northern Ireland and providing the right infrastructure for mobile telecommunications.

As well as my Department, there are a number of players in the market. The fact that the market is fully privatised also means that any investments made by my Department, of which there have been many, have to be state-aid

compliant to ensure that the competitiveness of the market is not compromised. Notwithstanding that, the Department has made significant investments in the telecommunications market, one of those being the broadband fund, which is now on its sixth call. Ms Boyle made a point about Aghyaran and Killeter, both of which were priority areas under the first call of the broadband fund, and, as such, are covered by the North West Electronics network. If anyone in those areas has an issue with coverage, they should look to that company to ensure that they can have coverage.

The quality of broadband services in parts of the rural west has been raised in the debate. As I said, I launched the broadband fund in August 2008, which was established exclusively to support infrastructure investment in rural areas. For the purposes of the first call for projects, I indicated that I would welcome projects that offered investment in those areas, and that is exactly what happened. Two projects emerged from the fund's first call, and in September 2008 work began to develop an extensive fixed wireless network across the west, which has been operational for some 18 months. It has delivered access to an extensive range of business and residential broadband packages in 18 of the 25 prioritised areas under the first call, including Greencastle and other parts of west Tyrone. Despite those efforts, however, there still appears to be a great reluctance to take up the fixed wireless broadband option.

At the public meeting in Greencastle in June, a fixed wireless connection was set up for the benefit of the people who attended the meeting. A service of 14.6 megabytes was achieved, and that specification, in such a rural area, is truly representative of next-generation performance. I would be very pleased to have it in my home. I understand that the project promoter, North West Electronics, has received some interest in the product and that there are nearly 100 consumers in that general area. That technology depends on a clear line of sight, and I understand that about 20 people have made enquiries about the service but cannot yet access a service. Members will be aware that, at the public meeting in June, the company undertook to make further investment if potential customer numbers reached 50. That is a good outcome, which shows how targeting government investment can drive further private sector investment as well. The money that we have given to North West Electronics to deliver

on a programme has been augmented by its own money, which is a good outcome.

We have been trying to talk to councils to let them know about the range of services. However, there is a misunderstanding, and we have heard a lot of that here today. A lot of people think that if they do not have the fibre to the cabinet service from BT, it is not really broadband. That is simply not the case. There are many technologies that can be used to access broadband. In his statement, Mr McElduff said that I claim that there is 100% coverage in Northern Ireland. There is 100% access to broadband, but it is not just through fixed line; it is access through a whole range of technologies, be it fixed line, next generation, satellite or fixed wireless. We cannot expect every house in Northern Ireland to have fixed line broadband because the fixed line would cost more than the house. I do not think that anybody expects DETI or any private company to spend in the region of £500 million, which is the figure that has been quoted to us, to connect people who remain without fixed line broadband.

We need to look at other technologies to infill where fixed lines are not available. That is what we have been doing, and, through the £1.9 million broadband fund, we have been quite successful in a lot of areas. I hope that the next call, which will be announced soon, will help to augment and fill in those gaps where we cannot have the fixed line. We have talked about line of sight being a problem. Technology evolves all the time, but, at the moment, the last option is to look for a satellite connection. I think that up to 1,000 people have to avail themselves of that satellite connection because they do not have line of sight.

The coverage level has been achieved. As I said, it has been exceeded in respect of the BT contract. It is the case that there is no existing obligation under the contract for BT to make services available to residential customers. The contract was to deliver to 85% of businesses across Northern Ireland. That has been exceeded; I think that it is more like 95% of businesses in Northern Ireland that are now covered. That has been a good result for the Department and businesses right across Northern Ireland. However, I accept that there is more to do. I had a meeting this week with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development at which we discussed the rural White Paper and how we can do more in relation to telecoms.

I hope that we will have the same working relationship between Departments that I had with her predecessor, when she was able to augment what we were doing in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment by putting some money in to look specifically at rural areas. I hope that we will be able to develop that again.

I listened to all of the Members' concerns. They need to look wider than just the fixed line; they need to look at all of the technologies available to us. They also need to recognise that BT, although it may have been the incumbent for many years, does not provide all of the answers. There may be other providers out there that can provide the service. It is a great testament to BT that everybody thinks of it when they think of telephone and broadband connections. However, other technologies will come online and will solve the problem of rural broadband, and nobody will be happier about that than me.

Adjourned at 5.44 pm.

Written Answers

This section contains the written answers to questions tabled by Members.

The content of the responses is as received at the time from the relevant Minister or representative of the Assembly Commission, and it has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process or changed.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 9 September 2011

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Sexual Orientation Strategy

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why they are to introduce a Sexual Orientation Strategy given that a number of statutory protections for the lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender communities are already in place.

(AQW 700/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The Sexual Orientation Strategy is primarily designed to consider and address the full range of statutory duties, including the duty outlined in S75(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual (LGB) sector made its views known during the consultations on the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy, and this has undoubtedly contributed to a greater understanding of the issues by all concerned. The process of developing and publishing an anti-discrimination and equality of opportunity strategy on sexual orientation will look across the full spectrum of all issues raised.

Officials are to meet with stakeholders, organisations from the sector and other departments, and they expect to deliver draft proposals to develop the Strategy by the autumn. This will then be made available to the OFMDFM Committee. The final consultation process will take place during early 2012 with a view to publishing a Sexual Orientation Strategy later that year.

North/South Ministerial Council

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much their Department has spent in relation to the North/South Ministerial Council in each year since 1998.

(AQW 726/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness:

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL JOINT SECRETARIAT (NORTH)

Year	Actual Expenditure £K
2000/2001	795
2001/2002	899
2002/2003	619
2003/2004	603
2004/2005	577
2005/2006	628

Year	Actual Expenditure £K
2006/2007	695
2007/2008	862
2008/2009	744
2009/2010	1,188
2010/11	777*

* Provisional figure, 2010/2011 accounts not yet finalised

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Draft Rural White Paper

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the consultation on a draft Rural White Paper.

(AQW 1012/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Public consultation on the draft Rural White Paper Action Plan finished on 13 June 2011. Over 60 responses were received from a wide arrange of rural stakeholders including representatives of the agricultural, environmental, equality and rural community sectors.

I am currently undertaking a series of bi-lateral meetings with my Ministerial colleagues to discuss the outcome of the public consultation and to agree a way forward.

I anticipate that a final Rural White Paper Action Plan will be published later this year following formal approval by the Executive.

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many times she has (i) met; (ii) spoken; and (iii) corresponded with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' (a) Secretary of State, Caroline Spelman MP; and (b) Minister of State, Jim Paice MP.

(AQW 1596/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: To date I have not had the opportunity to speak with or meet these Defra Ministers, as a meeting requested with Caroline Spelman MP in June was declined.

I am however, due to meet with the Defra Secretary of State and other Devolved Ministers on the 25th October 2011. I have also met with the Defra Minister Richard Benyon on the 19th July.

I have written to Caroline Spelman MP six times and Jim Paice MP was copied in to a letter I sent to his Ministerial colleague.

Department of Education

School Enrolment in the North Antrim Constituency

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to detail the current enrolment number for each (i) primary school; and (ii) post-primary school in the North Antrim constituency.

(AQW 1568/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education):

The information requested is detailed in the tables below.

The latest information available relates to the 2010/11 school year.

ENROLMENTS AT PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE NORTH ANTRIM CONSTITUENCY 2010/11

School name	Enrolment
Armoy Primary School	47
Ballycastle Integrated Primary School	154
Ballykeel Primary School	350
Ballymena Primary School	316
Ballymoney Controlled Integrated Primary School	267
Balnamore Primary School	104
Barnish Primary School	76
Braid Primary School	16
Braidside Integrated Primary School	358
Broughshane Primary School	319
Buick Memorial Primary School	356
Bushmills Primary School	117
Bushvalley Primary School	149
Camphill Primary School	375
Carnaghts Primary School	102
Carniny Primary School	269
Carrowreagh Primary School	71
Clough Primary School	168
Cloughmills Primary School	33
Dalriada School	79
Dunclug Primary School	86
Dunseverick Primary School	131
Eden Primary School	89
Fourtowns Primary School	219
Gaelscoil an Chastil	80
Garryduff Primary School	64
Glenravel Primary School	155
Gracehill Primary School	436
Harryville Primary School	122
Hazelbank Primary School	96

School name	Enrolment
Kells & Connor Primary School	177
Kilmoyle Primary School	121
Kirkinriola Primary School	93
Knockahollet Primary School	98
Landhead Primary School	59
Leaney Primary School	292
Lislagan Primary School	102
Longstone Primary School	42
Millquarter Primary School	143
Moorfields Primary School	204
Portglenone Primary School	119
Rasharkin Primary School	66
St Anne's Primary School, Corkey	69
St Brigid's Primary School, Clogh Mills	79
St Brigid's Primary School, Ballymoney	194
St Brigid's Primary School, Ballymena	326
St Colmcille's Primary School, Ballymena	316
St Joseph's Primary School, Dunloy	323
St Mary's Primary School, Rathlin	7
St Mary's Primary School, Portglenone	208
St Mary's Primary School, Glenravel	72
St Olcan's Primary School, Armoy	53
St Patrick's & St Brigid's Primary School, Ballycastle	356
St Patrick's Primary School, Rasharkin	204
St Patrick's Primary School, Loughguile	191
St Paul's Primary School, Ahoghill	32
Straidbilly Primary School	97
The Diamond Primary School	130
The Wm Pinkerton Memorial Primary School	68
Tildarg Primary School	74

ENROLMENTS AT POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE NORTH ANTRIM CONSTITUENCY 2010/11

School name	Enrolment
Ballee Community High School	298
Ballycastle High School	365
Ballymena Academy	1,206
Ballymoney High School	661
Cambridge House Grammar School	1,044
Cross and Passion College	770
Cullybackey High School	689
Dalriada School	849
Dunclug College	639
Dunluce High School	488
Our Lady of Lourdes High School, Ballymoney	218
Slemish College	753
St Louis Grammar School, Ballymena	948
St Patrick's College, Ballymena	524

Source: School census.

Note:

Figures for primary schools include pupils in nursery, reception and Year 1 – Year 7 classes.

Figures for post-primary schools include pupils in Year 8 – Year 14.

Education and Skills Authority

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what savings his Department would have made if the Education and Skills Authority had been established as originally scheduled.

(AQW 1578/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Whilst the major aim for the establishment of a single Education and Skills Authority was the improvement of educational outcomes for all, it would also have delivered key financial benefits with more streamlined and effective administrative support for those delivering education services, releasing funding for reallocation to front-line services.

The initial estimated savings expected to be made when ESA was to be established was £8.3m in 2009-10 and £13.0m in 2010-11.

Agreement on the establishment of ESA will ensure greater consistency and efficiency in service delivery. Without it, scarce resources will continue to be spent on unnecessary bureaucracy and spread too thinly over existing institutions.

Drumragh Integrated College, Omagh

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Education how many students who applied for a place at Drumragh Integrated College, Omagh in 2010 and 2011 attended an Exceptional Circumstances Body hearing; and of these how many were successful.

(AQW 1617/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Since the Exceptional Circumstances Body (ECB) came into being on 1 June 2010 I am advised by the Secretariat of the Body that it has taken receipt of 14 applications which relate to children where it has been claimed that exceptional circumstances exist requiring their admission to Drumragh Integrated College.

The ECB does not operate on a calendar year basis, and does not therefore maintain statistics in this format. The Body's records are structured to reflect the fact that the issue of placement letters at the conclusion of the transfer procedure (towards the end of May each year) stimulates the core business of the Body, which takes place during the period June to October. The Body is not however restricted to Year 8 applications, and may take receipt of a Year 8-12 application at any point in the year.

During the Body's first year of activity (1 June 2010 to 26 May 2011) it received 9 applications referenced to this school, fewer than 5 of which were unsuccessful, with the remaining successful applications resulting in directions that these children be admitted on a supernumerary basis. During the Body's second year of activity (27 May 2011 to date) it has so far received 5 applications referenced to this school.

Information on specific numbers of children, where those numbers relate to fewer than 5, have not been provided in this answer, as information in relation to applications treated by the Exceptional Circumstances Body is considered sensitive and therefore subject to the Department's disclosure policy on statistical information relating to children.

Funding for Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how much additional funding has been allocated by his Department to (i) the Education and Library Boards; and (ii) the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, since 1 April 2011.

(AQW 1622/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Additional funding has been allocated, since 1 April 2011 as follows

	Schools Related Recurrent¹ £'000	Youth Recurrent² £'000	Schools Related Capital² £'000	Youth Capital² £'000
Education & Library Boards	52,885	24,268	50,739	1,619
CCMS	928			

Notes:

- 1 This 'additional' funding is in respect of specific earmarked initiatives that were included in my Department's 2011/12 financial plans and allocated when the appropriate information was received from Education and Library Boards/CCMS.
- 2 All Youth and capital allocations for the 2011/12 year have been allocated after 1 April 2011.

Exceptional Circumstances Body

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Education (i) whether parents of students who apply to the Exceptional Circumstances Body seeking admission to a particular post-primary school are entitled to comprehensive feedback if they are unsuccessful; and (ii) for his Department's definition of 'comprehensive' in relation to this feedback.

(AQW 1644/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: It is reasonable for applicants to any decision-making body to expect to receive a full explanation for any decisions that result from an application. As the Exceptional Circumstances Body operates independent of the Department of Education, it would be inappropriate for the Department to

seek to specify the level of detail that should be supplied by the Body in communicating feedback to applicants.

I understand that all applicants to the Body, whether successful or unsuccessful, receive feedback which is referenced to the three tests which must be applied to the evidence presented in order to determine whether or not a child must attend a specified post-primary school due to the exceptional circumstances being claimed.

I am advised that if an applicant is unsuccessful and receives feedback which is unclear, or which is considered by the applicant to be lacking in substance, he/she may request, through the Body's Secretariat, further clarification from the Chairperson of the panel that heard that particular case. These arrangements are designed to help applicants fully comprehend each decision made by the Body.

School Enrolment in the North Down Constituency

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the current enrolment number for each (i) primary school; and (ii) post-primary school in the North Down constituency.

(AQW 1685/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested is detailed in the tables below.

The latest information available relates to the 2010/11 school year.

ENROLMENTS AT PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE NORTH DOWN CONSTITUENCY 2010/11

School name	Enrolment
Ballyholme Primary School	593
Ballymagee Primary School	409
Ballyvester Primary School	68
Bangor Central Primary School	572
Bloomfield Primary School	332
Clandeboye Primary School	132
Connor House Preparatory School	85
Crawfordsburn Primary School	219
Donaghadee Primary School	418
Glencraig Integrated Primary School	226
Glenlola Collegiate	83
Grange Park Primary School	363
Hollywood Primary School	324
Kilcooley Primary School	144
Kilmaine Primary School	670
Millisle Primary School	172
Rathmore Primary School	551
Redburn Primary School	76
St Anne's Primary School, Donaghadee	31
St Comgall's Primary School, Bangor	290

School name	Enrolment
St Malachy's Primary School, Bangor	330
St Patrick's Primary School, Holywood	217
Sullivan Upper School	184
Towerview Primary School	369

ENROLMENTS AT POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE NORTH DOWN CONSTITUENCY 2010/11

School name	Enrolment
Bangor Academy and 6th Form College	1,412
Bangor Grammar School	901
Glenlola Collegiate	1,073
Priory College	481
St Columbanus' College, Bangor	558
Sullivan Upper School	1,070

Source: School census October 2010.

Note:

Figures for primary schools include pupils in nursery, reception and Year 1 – Year 7 classes.

Figures for post-primary schools include pupils in Year 8 – Year 14.

Department for Social Development

Jobs and Benefits Project

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister for Social Development when his Department intends to roll-out further the Jobs and Benefits Project.

(AQO 269/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): The Jobs and Benefits service has been introduced into 27 offices across Northern Ireland, however at this juncture it is not possible to introduce it into the remaining 8 offices as no capital funding has been made available to the Department to complete the roll-out. While it is not possible to continue with the roll-out of new or substantially refurbished offices as originally envisaged, both my colleague, the Minister for Employment and Learning and I remain committed to maintaining and improving services to customers and will seek to take advantage of future opportunities to complete the introduction of the Jobs & Benefits service on an office by office basis. There is, however, no timeline for this work and progress will be subject to the identification of funding.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 16 September 2011

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Social Protection Fund

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) how much has been spent to date under the Social Protection Fund; and (ii) how much is estimated to be spent in the remainder of the current financial year.

(AQW 1613/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): To date, no monies have been released from the fund. Our officials are working with other departments to assess funding options and potential initiatives.

St Patrick's Barracks Site, Ballymena

Mr Swann asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the cost of security provision for the St Patrick's Barracks site in Ballymena, broken down for each year since its closure.

(AQW 1616/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister took responsibility for the St Patrick's barracks site, Ballymena on 15 April 2011. From then until 31 August 2011 security costs of £86,683 have been incurred. These costs are based on the existing contract for security which expires at the end of November 2011.

We do not hold information on costs incurred by the Ministry of Defence on the site prior to its handover.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Countryside Management Scheme

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what percentage of Countryside Management scheme payments were paid by the end of (i) July 2011; and (ii) August 2011; and how this compares with her Department's targets for payment.

(AQW 1592/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): My Department has an overall target to pay 90 % of NI Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS) claims which present no technical queries by 30 June of the year following submission of the claim. For the 2010 scheme, 31.9% (292) claims were paid by the end of July 2011, and 46.9% (430) were paid by the end of August 2011. The target was not achieved for two main reasons. Firstly Countryside Management Inspectors were reassigned to Single Farm Payment inspections which delayed commencement of inspections of 2010 NICMS. Secondly whenever initial inspections were undertaken the results indicated a high level of non-compliance and over-declaration within a significant number of claims. In line with EU regulations,

my Department is now carrying out a number of additional inspections following which outstanding payments will be progressed.

Countryside Management Scheme

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many applicants to the Countryside Management Scheme, who completed field boundary restoration work, received payment for this work by 1 September 2011.

(AQW 1593/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: By 1 September 2011 there were no NI Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS) applicants who claimed for field boundary restoration work under the scheme who had received payment. The Department has been unable to pay such claims because of a high level of non-compliance with scheme rules and over-declarations discovered during on farm inspections.

Special Adviser

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 1549/11-15, the answer to which failed to provide the information requested, to now provide details of (i) how many candidates were considered for the post of Ministerial Special Adviser; (ii) what account was taken of any potential imbalance in religious background or gender in the pool from which she selected her Special Adviser; (iii) how wide was the trawl for candidates and how did she ensure that it was 'broadly based' as required by the Code of Practice on the Appointment of Special Advisers; and (iv) to publish the job description and person specification drawn up before the Special Adviser was appointed.

(AQW 1654/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I have nothing further to add to my response to AWQ 1549/11-15. I am aware of the process to appoint Special Advisers. I can assure the Member that the appointment was carried out in line with the procedures. The detailed process of the selection was not carried out by my officials but by my Party.

Strategy for the Equine Industry in Northern Ireland

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps have been taken to implement the recommendations in the 'Strategy for the Equine Industry in Northern Ireland'; and to outline her Department's position and plans on recognising the horse as an agricultural animal.

(AQW 1706/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The 'Strategy for the Equine Industry in Northern Ireland' was developed by and for the equine industry and it identified the requirement for a single body to take forward the Strategy's recommendations. The Equine Council (ECNI) is the body tasked with taking forward the industry's Strategy. The Department fully supports the ECNI and recently made funds available for start-up costs, including the appointment of a Development Officer.

The issue of recognising the horse as an agricultural animal is a key consideration within the Strategy and will be one of the priority actions to be taken forward by the ECNI's newly appointed Development Officer. The ECNI will make its case to DARD on this issue in due course.

Badger Culling

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her Department's current position on badger culling.

(AQW 1707/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: There has been considerable progress made in reducing TB incidence in cattle in the north of Ireland. The herd incidence has almost halved from nearly 10% in 2002 to 5.03% at 31 July 2011. The number of TB reactor cattle in 2010 at 6,400 was 22% lower than in 2009 and the lowest since

1998. Also, the number of herd breakdowns in 2010 at 1,150 was the lowest since 1996 when TB levels were on a rising trend.

While these figures are encouraging, there is clearly more work to be done. TB is a very complex and challenging disease that is difficult to eradicate and it has an adverse impact on those farm businesses affected. There is no simple solution or 'quick-fix' to TB eradication. My aim is to reduce and ultimately eradicate TB in cattle here and we have a rigorous EU Commission approved TB eradication programme in place that includes a strand to address the wildlife factor.

There are no plans for any cull of badgers here. As the badger is a protected species, any direct interventions in the badger population would be subject to the agreement of the Environment Minister, the issue of appropriate licences, and the availability of the substantial additional funding that would be needed. My officials are monitoring closely the progress in England and Wales on their proposals for badger control in areas with high and persistent levels of bovine TB.

Additional funding has been allocated in the DARD budget to commission TB and wildlife research and studies to address critical knowledge gaps and provide a robust science-led evidence base to further guide the TB eradication strategy.

The issue of badgers and bovine TB is very complex, emotive and contentious. While science has established that there is a link between TB in badgers and TB in cattle, it has not yet established, with certainty, how the disease is spread between them and what can be done to prevent its spread.

Interventions to address the wildlife factor may include improving biosecurity, as well as more direct intervention such as the vaccination of badgers, which may be the most feasible solution in the long-term. My officials are monitoring closely the studies being conducted in the south of Ireland and in England to develop a viable oral badger vaccine and cost-effective means of vaccine deployment. They will similarly keep a close interest in developments to produce a viable cattle vaccine.

Direct interventions in wildlife will incur substantial cost and must be fully justified in cost-benefit terms. We need to be certain that the benefit would justify the considerable costs.

Action to deal with cattle to cattle transmission of TB will continue to be an important element of the TB strategy as we move forward.

New Season Comber Potatoes/Comber Earlies

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she anticipates that New Season Comber Potatoes/Comber Earlies will be granted European Union Protected Geographical Indication status.

(AQW 2021/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am pleased to be able to confirm that the application for Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) status for New Season Comber Potatoes/Comber Earlies, is in the final stage of the process, having been published on the European Commission's Official Journal.

This is to provide other Member States and Third Countries the opportunity to comment on the application. If no comments or objections are received I would anticipate that the Commission should be in a position to grant PGI status by the end of this year. However you will appreciate that the timescale for the process of granting EU Protected Food Names is entirely a matter for the Commission.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Illegal Fishing and Poaching

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many prosecutions her Department has pursued for (i) illegal fishing; and (ii) poaching in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1586/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): The table below indicates the number of prosecutions taken by the Department in the last five years relating to all types of illegal fishing.

Year	Number of Cases Processed
2006	56
2007	78
2008	108
2009	180
2010	126

The Department defines poaching as one type of illegal fishing activity and such cases are included in the above table.

Policing of Fishing in Lakes and Waterways

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many staff in her Department and its arm's-length bodies are employed in the policing of fishing in lakes and waterways.

(AQW 1588/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department is responsible for the enforcement of fisheries protection legislation in its jurisdiction and currently employs 10 Fishery Protection Officers to carry this function, a further post is vacant. The Department also works closely with Private Water Bailiffs from angling clubs and with the PSNI on a wide range of enforcement issues. The Department does not sponsor any arms-length bodies involved in Fisheries issues.

Líofa 2015

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the cost to date of Líofa 2015; (ii) the financial allocations and obligations that have been identified and assigned to this project in any forthcoming budget, broken down by (a) year; and (b) budget heading; and (iii) the business plan for Líofa 2015.

(AQW 1595/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The breakdown of cost for the Líofa 2015 initiative launch:-

	Cost
Interpreters	£ 245.00
Website	£1217.16
Banners	£ 213.60
Hospitality	£ 694.80
Total	£2370.56

No obligations have been identified and assigned to this project in any forthcoming budget.

Business case attached as per your request.

Annex A

PRO-FORMA BUSINESS CASE (INCLUDING ECONOMIC APPRAISAL) FOR EXPENDITURE APPROVALS LESS THAN £10,000

This pro forma is only for use with proposals involving public expenditures less than £10k in total including, for example, mainstream public expenditure (DEL), EU and other funding, over the whole life of the project.

Project Title	Líofa Project
Branch/ALB	Languages Branch
Completed By	Ann Perry
Authorised By; Grade	Kevin Hamill - DP
Date Appraisal Approved	
Total Cost	£2675.76

The Requirement

Accountability and good practice require the use of appraisal at all levels of decision-making. Used properly, it leads to better choices by policy makers and managers. It encourages groups to both question and justify what they do by providing a framework regarding the use of limited resources that should lead to decisions based on value for money.

Appraisal is not optional. The principles of appraisal should be applied, with proportionate effort, to all proposals for spending or saving public money, or otherwise changing the ways in which public resources are employed. These principles apply equally to policies, programmes and projects, to the public expenditure and resources of NDPBs and Agencies, and not just to Departments.

Use of this Pro Forma

The document is only for use with proposals involving public expenditures of less than £10k in total including, for example, mainstream public expenditure (DEL), EU and other funding, over the whole life of the project. It is designed bearing in mind that effort to be applied should be proportionate to the scale of the expenditure. By addressing the points below, the general principles of appraisal are applied, and a suitable analysis is made to help decision-making and to help develop a value for money solution.

Economics Services Unit

1. Why is the service or item required (i.e. need) and what are the associated objectives?

Ministerial Direction – Minister Ní Chuilín has stated that one of her main priorities in office is the promotion of Gaeilc culture to as wide an audience as possible.

The Líofa Project will contribute to the achievement of this goal. IT Assist will design a web page on the Departmental Website which the public can sign up to to take up the Líofa challenge and to access a list of Irish Language classes in their area.

The main objective of the project is to encourage 1000 people from all walks of life across the north to sign up to becoming fluent in the Irish language by 2015.

2. Why does the project require government assistance and what are the costs?

At present, there is no comprehensive list setting out where Irish Language classes are available for members of the public who wish to learn Irish. DCAL intends to provide this service and help facilitate people who wish to become fluent in the Irish language.

Initial Costs

Launch at Long Gallery in Stormont	approximately £1000
Interpreters/Sign Language	approximately £245
Annual Survey of participants by Statistics Branch	Minimal
Web Site Construction	£1217.16 (Notional)
Launch Banners	£213.60

Programmer Analyst

Work Oversight 1 day

Programmer

Livelihood	Development 2 days
Testing	1/2 day
Deployment	minimal
Map Investigation & Development	2 days
Testing	1/2 day
Deployment	minimal

Cost

PA	1 days £196.76
Programmer	5 days £1020.40

Website total £1217.16

Future Costs

Future costs are not quantifiable at this stage. This will be dependant on how the Líofo 2015 develops.

Total Costs

£2675.76

3. What would be the effect of not providing the service or item?

Project has been identified as a flagship project for the Department by the Minister. The Department promotes the use of Irish. The absence of a comprehensive list about where Irish Language classes are available impedes access to those who wish to learn the language and fails to comply with departmental obligations under the European Charter for Minority Languages and the St. Andrews Agreement.

4. **What are the alternatives to providing the chosen item or service level?**

Option 1

Foras na Gaeilge/Community Group could take the project forward

Option 2

Ask an external IT company to design and maintain the website

Option 3

Do nothing

5. **Why were the alternative options rejected?**

None of these options are viable for the following reasons:

Option 1

Foras/Community groups do not currently have the available resources to take the project forward. Additionally, within the given timescales it was decided that the Initiative could be taken forward most effectively by using Departmental resources.

Option 2

The cost of using an external IT company would be prohibitive. In addition, this would create an ongoing cost for the Department in terms of monitoring and updating the website.

Option 3

The Project has been identified as a flagship project for the Department by the Minister. The 'do nothing' approach is therefore not an option.

6. **What is the rationale for selecting the chosen option and how has value for money been achieved?**

Minister identified that she would like the Department to promote the Gaelic culture by encouraging people to become fluent in Irish in 2015.

It was decided that the best way to achieve this was by placing a web page on the Departmental Website which could be used to list all Irish language classes etc presently being run in Northern Ireland and to allow those willing to take up the Líofo 2015 challenge to sign-up online.

Value for money was achieved by using existing NICS internal resources and seeking quotes in line with procurement guidance.

Líofo 2015

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether an equality impact assessment has been carried out on the Líofo 2015 initiative; and to outline the results.

(AQW 1612/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The launch of the Líofo 2015 initiative was subject to an equality screening, I can confirm that this exercise has taken place. The initiative will be open to all sections of the community, including all s75 groups.

Líofo 2015

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for a breakdown of the projected cost of the Líofo 2015 initiative.

(AQW 1614/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The breakdown of cost for the Líofo 2015 initiative launch:

	Cost
Interpreters	£ 245.00
Website	£1217.16
Banners	£ 213.60
Hospitality	£ 694.80
Total	£2370.56

It is anticipated that further expenditure may be required during the 4 year life of the Líofo 2015 initiative.

Líofo 2015

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what consultation her Department carried out on the Líofo 2015 initiative prior to its launch.

(AQW 1615/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Departmental officials and the Minister met with key stakeholders prior to the launch to seek their endorsement and take on board their views.

No formal consultation was carried out.

Special Advisers

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 1420/11-15, why she claimed in a BBC Spotlight programme that “the party appointed myself and Mary McArdle to these positions” when the DFP Code of Practice on the Appointment of Special Advisers places the onus for the selection of a Special Adviser on the Minister and states that Ministers should make the selection on justifiable grounds, that Ministers have a personal responsibility and that Ministers should ensure that they consider a number of candidates.

(AQW 1643/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I appointed Mary McArdle as my Special Adviser.

Special Adviser

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 1476/11-15, the answer to which failed to provide the information requested, to now provide details of (i) how many candidates were considered for the post of Ministerial Special Adviser; (ii) what account was taken of any potential imbalance in religious background or gender in the pool from which she selected her Special Adviser; (iii) how wide was the trawl for candidates and how did she ensure that it was ‘broadly based’ as required by the Code of Practice on the Appointment of Special Advisers; and (iv) to publish the job description and person specification drawn up before the Special Adviser was appointed.

(AQW 1652/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I refer the member to my answer to AQW 1476/11 -15.

Fish Poaching: Inland Waterways

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps her Department is taking, or intends to take, to combat fish poaching in inland waterways.

(AQW 1673/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Poaching is an illegal fishing activity and DCAL is concerned with any illegal fishing activity taking place throughout its operational area.

DCAL Fisheries Protection Officers, under the management of Senior Fisheries Officers undertake regular patrols on land and water, on rivers, lakes and coastal areas throughout the DCAL operational area. They also carry out intelligence led operations to detect, disrupt and deter those involved in illegal fishing activities.

In addition Fisheries Protection Officers undertake inspections of fish dealers' premises and businesses selling fish such as hotels, restaurants and commercial outlets to ensure that those engaged comply fully with the 1966 Fisheries Act and Fisheries Byelaws.

DCAL Fisheries Protection staff also work closely with local angling clubs, many of which have Private Water Bailiffs who play an important role in supporting the Department in combating illegal fishing activities.

Ulster-Scots Heritage

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans her Department has to promote the Ulster-Scots heritage.

(AQW 1752/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The two main organisations funded by my Department that are involved in the promotion of Ulster-Scots heritage are the Ulster-Scots Agency and the Ministerial Advisory Group which is currently developing the Ulster-Scots Academy approach.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) jointly funds with the Department of Arts Heritage and the Gaeltacht, the North South Language Body which comprises the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge, the Irish Language Agency.

The Ulster-Scots Agency's statutory remit is specified in the legislation (The North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies) (NI) Order 1999) and has responsibility for the promotion of Ulster-Scots language and culture. Using its approved budget of £3.3m the Agency funds projects and programmes which promote Ulster-Scots culture and heritage activities.

The work of the Ministerial Advisory Group which is currently developing the Ulster- Scots Academy approach includes three work strands- one of which is Heritage and Culture.

Under this strand there are a number of projects currently under way and further projects are being identified which will contribute to the promotion of Ulster- Scots heritage. Examples of these projects include the development of an Ulster- Scots tourism app and refurbishment of the ancestral home of the seventh president of the USA, Andrew Jackson, in Carrickfergus.

Funding is also available from departmental mainstream programmes for projects which may have an Ulster-Scots language, heritage or culture dimension, which cannot be separated from the primary funding objectives.

I have stated my intention to bring forward a strategy for Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture.

Disabled Parking: Public Angling Estate Waters

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the review of parking for disabled people at public angling estate waters; and how it will affect Portavoe Reservoir in Donaghadee.

(AQW 1765/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is carrying out a review of parking facilities for disabled anglers at Public Angling Estate waters. This review will be undertaken utilising existing resources and some preparatory work has been completed. The matter will be progressed in line with other Departmental priorities.

NI Water own, Portavoe Reservoir. Technically any person entering the property other than anglers with the specified documentation are trespassing. However, enforcement of this situation is a matter for NI Water as owner of the facility.

NI Water has recently advised my Department of its intention to undertake urgent remedial and maintenance work at a number of reservoirs including Portavoe. This will result in the temporary closure of Portavoe as a fishery in 2012 while the work is carried out.

Electronic Libraries for Northern Ireland: Contract

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the tendering process for the next Electronic Libraries for Northern Ireland contract.

(AQW 1793/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Work is underway by Libraries NI to replace the 'Electronic Libraries for Northern Ireland' (ELFNI) Contract.

Libraries NI have developed an Outline Business Case for a replacement system and inform me that the tender process is expected to commence this autumn.

Library Opening Hours

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the criteria and formula used to determine the proposed reduction in library opening hours.

(AQW 1823/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I recognise that both the Department and its sponsored bodies have already had to take very difficult decisions in planning to live within reduced budget allocations over the next four years.

In managing these new pressures, the Department will work closely with its sponsored bodies to minimise impacts on front line services and protect priority areas.

In order to deliver some of these savings Libraries NI have commenced a review of Library opening hours. I would emphasise that nothing has been finalised by the Libraries NI Board at this stage. I understand that a consultation has commenced and that will include a conversation with each community about when they would like to see their library opened. I would encourage people to take part in the consultation.

Decisions will not be made until all the information from the consultation has been collated and presented to the Board of Libraries NI. The Board of Libraries NI contains councillors from the DUP, the SDLP, my own party and the UUP.

In developing proposals for revised opening hours the following principles were applied by Libraries NI:

- the proposals must deliver the required level of savings i.e. a reduction overall of approximately 20% (or 1,200 staff hours per week) equating to between £750k - £800k per annum;
- the available hours should be used in the way that best meets customer need;
- opening hours should relate to the historic level of use of a library; and
- the opening hours should be sustainable i.e. ad hoc closure due to staffing shortages should be avoided other than in the most exceptional circumstances.

It is proposed that there should be 4 Bands of libraries for the purpose of opening hours:

- Band 1 - Libraries open 57 hours per week
- Band 2 - Libraries open 40 hours per week
- Band 3 - Libraries open 30 hours per week
- Band 4 - Libraries open 18 hours per week

Libraries were allocated to a Band based on historic levels of use. Levels of use (or activity figures) for each library were determined by adding together:

- annual visits figure for 2010/11;

- annual issues (i.e. loans) figure for 2010/11;
- annual Public Access Computer sessions for 2010/11; and
- active members figure for 2010/11.

Where the total activity figure was:

- Greater than 280,000, the library was allocated to Band 1;
- Between 100,000 and 279,999, the library was allocated to Band 2;
- Between 80,000 and 99,999, the library was allocated to Band 3; and
- Less than 80,000, the library was allocated to Band 4.

There are a small number of exceptions to these categories. These relate mainly to libraries that have recently undergone, or will undergo, significant changes that mean that historic levels of use are not a reliable indicator, including:

- Where libraries were closed for part of the year because of major refurbishment;
- A number of libraries which were identified in the Stage 1 review of library provision in Greater Belfast as providing mitigation for closure of other libraries in their vicinity;
- Two libraries in Greater Belfast which had their hours reduced as a result of the Stage 1 review and are subject to planned review with regard to their use; and
- The Centre for Migration Studies and the Irish and Local Studies Library in Armagh which are not primarily lending libraries.

A copy of the spreadsheet with the activity levels of each library and the current and proposed hours has been published on the Libraries NI website.

Licensed Fishing Engines, Salmon Nets or Netting Operations

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether her Department is aware of any licensed fishing engines, salmon nets or netting operations which are active (i) around the coast of Northern Ireland; (ii) around the coast of the island of Ireland; and (iii) around the north coast of counties Antrim and Londonderry.

(AQW 1837/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL is empowered to licence salmon fishing engines in coastal waters within its jurisdiction by the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966.

- (i) In 2011 the Department has issued 6 licences for salmon fishing engines in the DCAL jurisdiction of the coastal waters of the North. Catch records over the last 5 years indicate that 4 of these licences are actively fished. The Lough's Agency is responsible for the licensing of salmon fishing engines in the Foyle and Carlingford coastal waters.
- (ii) The Lough's Agency and Inland Fisheries Ireland are responsible for the licensing of salmon fishing engines in their respective jurisdictions.
- (iii) In 2011 the Department has issued 4 licences for salmon fishing engines in the DCAL jurisdiction of the coastal waters of counties Antrim and Derry. Catch records over the last 5 years indicate that 3 of these licences are actively fished. The Lough's Agency is responsible for the licensing of salmon fishing engines in the Foyle coastal waters of County Derry.

Murals in West Belfast: Funding

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding her Department has provided for the painting of murals in West Belfast in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1840/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Funding for murals, which comes from a variety of sources, is provided under the Re-imagining Communities Programme. The programme is delivered by the Arts Council NI and is overseen by the Shared Communities Consortium. Details of the total provided for murals in West Belfast in the last three years are as follows

2008-2009	£30,000
2009-2010	£26,650
2010-2011	£14,700

Fish Poaching: Rivers and Waterways of North Antrim

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what measures are in place to eradicate fish poaching in the rivers and waterways of North Antrim.

(AQW 1847/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Poaching is an illegal fishing activity and DCAL is concerned with any illegal fishing activity taking place throughout its operational area, which includes North Antrim.

North Antrim is part of the DCAL Fisheries Protection Northern Area.

The area enforcement team of three Fisheries Protection Officers, under the management of a Senior Fisheries Officer, undertake regular patrols on the land, rivers, lakes and coastal waters of the area. They also carry out intelligence led operations to detect, disrupt and deter those involved in illegal fishing activities.

In addition Fisheries Protection Officers undertake inspections of fish dealers' premises and businesses selling fish such as hotels, restaurants and commercial outlets to ensure that those engaged comply fully with the 1966 Fisheries Act and Fisheries Byelaws.

Northern Area Fisheries Protection staff also work closely with local angling clubs, many of which have Private Water Bailiffs, who play an important role in supporting the Department in combating illegal fishing activities.

Department of Education

St Mary's College

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education why extra places for teacher training were given to St Mary's College during 2009/10.

(AQW 1573/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): In determining the allocation of initial teacher education (ITE) places each year, my Department considers a number of factors, including: the needs of our school system, both in the short and longer term; the demographic position in relation to individual phases of education; and the needs of specific sectors.

Enrolments in Irish-medium schools and units across the period 2004/05 to 2009/10 showed a continuing upward trend in overall enrolments (an increase of almost 25% from 3,272 in 2004/05 to 4,075 in 2009/10), whereas overall pupil numbers had decreased by 4% from 343,295 in 2004/05 to 329,457 in 2009/10. In recognition of the upward trend in the Irish-medium sector, an additional 10 earmarked places for the BEd Irish-medium primary programme were approved in the 2009/10 academic year for St Mary's University College, as the provider of the BEd Irish-medium route.

I will, as part of the annual ITE intake approval process, be carefully considering the number of teachers needed in future years, and will continue to take account of any particular sectoral or curricular needs.

Joint Efficiency Review Stage Two Report

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education for an update on his Department's and the Department of Finance and Personnel's Joint Efficiency Review Stage Two Report (PEDU).

(AQW 1575/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As part of Stage Two of the Joint Efficiency Review, the Performance and Delivery Unit (PEDU) has been reviewing the scope for improved efficiency in Home to School Transport and School Catering Service.

Work in both areas is nearing completion and I expect that reports will shortly be presented to me and to the Minister for Finance and Personnel for consideration.

I have already signalled my intention to make public the final reports following completion of the exercise and to ensure that action is taken in response to the recommendations they contain.

Education and Library Boards

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what action the Education and Library Boards are taking to make savings and protect frontline services.

(AQW 1576/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The action required by Education and Library Boards is to make savings in line with the Savings Delivery Plan that has been agreed for my Department as part of Budget 2010.

The Savings Delivery Plan focuses savings in areas that protect frontline services as far as possible within an extremely constrained financial budget.

I have recently approved Resource Allocation Plans for all 5 Education and Library Boards. These detail challenging savings requirements totalling some £25.8m. It is important that these savings are progressed to help reduce administrative costs and protect frontline services.

Education System: Duplication and Waste

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what action he intends to take to avoid unnecessary duplication and waste in the education system.

(AQW 1577/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: A Savings Delivery Plan has been developed to realise resource savings over the four year Budget period of £101m / £187m / £229m / £306m. The savings measures seek to protect spend on Departmental priorities and bear down on unnecessary duplication and administration.

I have recently approved Resource Allocation Plans for all 5 ELBs. These include challenging savings targets totalling some £25.8m. It is important that these savings are progressed to help reduce administrative costs and protect frontline services.

At the Committee for Education on 8 June, I indicated my intention to look at years 2, 3 and 4 of the budget period. Officials have now embarked on a full and robust review of all current areas of funding in order to assess if the budget can be re-profiled.

Agreement on the establishment of ESA will ensure greater consistency and efficiency in service delivery. Without it, scarce resources will continue to be spent on unnecessary bureaucracy and spread too thinly over existing institutions.

Nursery School Places: East Antrim

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Education how many children were unable to obtain a place at a nursery school in the East Antrim area in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1579/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Funded pre-school places are available in statutory nursery schools and nursery units attached to primary schools and in voluntary/private settings in receipt of funding under the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme.

The aim of the Programme is to provide a funded pre-school place for every child, in their final pre-school year, whose parent wishes to avail of it.

It is not possible to determine the number of children who did not get a place in a nursery school as, in applying for a funded place, parents are invited to list a number of preferences across the range of statutory and voluntary/private providers. When a setting is unable to accommodate a child the application is passed on to the next provider on the parent's list of preferences. A child is not considered to be unplaced until all parental preferences on an application form have been exhausted.

The table below, therefore, shows the number of children, in their final pre-school year, who did not get a pre-school place in any DE funded setting in the East Antrim* area in the last five years:

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
No of Unplaced Children	50	64	60	79	24

* The North Eastern Education and Library Board define the East Antrim area as being Newtownabbey, Larne and Carrickfergus Council areas.

School Closures

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Education how many (i) primary schools; and (ii) post-primary schools have closed in the last three years due to a lack of student numbers; and of those, how many were from the (a) Catholic maintained sector; and (b) controlled sector.

(AQW 1581/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: It is the relevant School Managing Authority in conjunction with the Board of Governors of individual schools that bring forward Development Proposals to the Department of Education for school closures.

A school's future viability is considered on its own merits against the six criteria listed in the Sustainable Schools Policy and therefore any decision is not based solely on the enrolment number. This means that it is not possible to attribute closures purely to low enrolments. However, details have been provided below of the total number of school closures during the last three years by school type and sector.

There have been 25 school closures in the last three school years. This total is broken down as follows:

- 11 Controlled primary schools
- 8 Maintained primary schools
- 2 Preparatory departments
- 3 Controlled post-primary schools
- 1 Grant-maintained integrated post-primary school

Additionally, 7 schools have closed due to amalgamations in the last 3 years to form 3 new schools. This total is broken down as follows:

- 4 Maintained primary schools formed 2 new primary schools.
- 2 Maintained post-primary schools and 1 voluntary grammar formed 1 new post-primary school.

Pupils from a Minority Community

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education (i) how many of the integrated primary and secondary schools met the Department's criteria of a 30% intake of pupils from a minority community; and (ii) to detail the percentage of pupils from a minority community attending each integrated school.

(AQW 1619/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

- (i) The latest information available relates to the 2010/2011 school year. There are currently 42 integrated primary schools, and 20 post primary schools. Of these, 19 primary schools and 8 post primary schools do not have an intake of 30% or more from a minority community.
- (ii) The tables below provide the religious breakdown of integrated schools, including the percentage of pupils from a minority community, attending each integrated school.

RELIGIOUS BREAKDOWN OF INTEGRATED PRIMARY SCHOOLS 2010/11

School name	Protestant %	Catholic %	Other %
Cliftonville Integrated Primary School	36.6	35.29	28.34
Forge Integrated Primary School	29.84	25	45.16
Hazelwood Primary School	27.57	50.55	21.88
Cranmore Integrated Primary School	37.7	38.8	23.5
Groarty Primary School	#	70.73	*
Enniskillen Integrated Primary School	36.33	47.35	16.33
Omagh Integrated Primary School	32.94	52.82	14.24
Oakgrove Integrated Primary School	25.55	49.78	24.67
Roe Valley Integrated Primary School	26.58	58.86	14.56
Carnlough Controlled Integrated Primary School	44.68	36.17	19.15
Glengormley Integrated Primary School	22.77	43.07	34.16
Crumlin Primary School	63.74	11.7	24.56
Ballymoney Controlled Integrated Primary School	74.53	4.87	20.6
Carhill Integrated Primary School	46.15	26.92	26.92
Ballycastle Integrated Primary School	37.01	40.26	22.73
Rathenraw Integrated Primary School	36.36	36.36	27.27
Round Tower Integrated Primary School	35.82	27.24	36.94
Millstrand Integrated Primary School	41.97	37.82	20.21
Braidside Integrated Primary School	38.27	39.11	22.63
Corran Integrated Primary School	34.45	42.11	23.44
Acorn Integrated Primary School	50.88	36.84	12.28
Spires Integrated Primary School	35.32	34.33	30.35
Maine Integrated Primary School	32.11	37.61	30.28
Kircubbin Primary School	47.41	31.9	20.69

Portaferry Integrated Primary School	22.81	54.39	22.81
Bangor Central Primary School	57.34	14.16	28.5
Annsborough Primary School	#	47.37	*
Glencraig Integrated Primary School	59.73	18.14	22.12
Fort Hill Integrated Primary School	72.41	5.6	21.98
All Childrens Integrated Primary School	26.64	58.88	14.49
Loughview Integrated Primary School	40.75	33.02	26.23
Cedar Integrated Primary School	32.72	43.32	23.96
Oakwood Integrated Primary School	37.75	38.73	23.53
Millennium Integrated Primary School	32.59	45.09	22.32
Drumlins Integrated Primary School	39.66	35.34	25
Rowandale Integrated Primary School	18.63	43.14	38.24
Kilbroney Integrated Primary School	21.98	58.24	19.78
Bridge Integrated Primary School	37.84	47.17	14.99
Portadown Integrated Primary School	24.14	32.33	43.53
Windmill Integrated Primary School	31.44	44.98	23.58
Saints & Scholars Int Primary School	27.43	39.66	32.91
Phoenix Integrated Primary School	33.56	52.35	14.09
Total	39	37.24	24.18

Note:

- 1 Primary includes nursery, reception and year 1 - 7 classes.
 - 2 Integrated schools includes 'Controlled integrated' and 'Grant maintained integrated'
- * relates to fewer than 5 pupils.
- # means a figure relating to 5 or more pupils has been treated to prevent disclosure.

RELIGIOUS BREAKDOWN OF INTEGRATED POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS 2010/11

School name	Protestant %	Catholic %	Other%
Hazelwood College	48.38	31.9	19.72
Malone Integrated College	41.33	45.73	12.93
Oakgrove Integrated College	30.8	67.33	1.87
Erne Integrated College	37.38	49.05	13.57
Drumragh College	28.4	58.8	12.81
Crumlin Integrated College	36.36	37.23	26.41
Parkhall Integrated College	81.38	2.64	15.98
Slemish College	43.69	33.47	22.84
North Coast Integrated College	57.69	21.66	20.65

School name	Protestant %	Catholic %	Other%
Ulidia Integrated College	54.48	33.96	11.57
Sperrin Integrated College	43.24	44.49	12.27
Priory College	73.6	12.27	14.14
Fort Hill College	73.33	8.59	18.08
Lagan College	42.5	36.61	20.89
Shimna Integrated College	31.43	49.14	19.43
Strangford Integrated College	52.04	25.44	22.52
Blackwater Integrated College	59.28	29.94	10.78
Brownlow Int College	33.41	51.09	15.5
New-Bridge Integrated College	43.88	46.52	9.6
Integrated College Dungannon	29.16	58.93	11.91
Total	47.53	36.79	15.69

Integrated Schools: Pupil Capacity

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education (i) what is the current overall pupil capacity for integrated schools; and (ii) how many of these places are (a) filled; and (b) unfilled, broken down by each school. **(AQW 1620/11-15)**

Mr O'Dowd: The current overall pupil capacity (ie approved enrolment) for integrated schools in the 2010/11 school year is 21,995. The number of these places that were (a) filled and (b) unfilled, broken down by each school is as detailed in the table below.

School name	(a) Places Filled	(b) Places Unfilled
Cliftonville Integrated Primary School	159	179
Forge Integrated Primary School	240	10
Hazelwood Primary School	389	17
Cranmore Integrated Primary School	176	27
Groarty Primary School	40	23
Enniskillen Integrated Primary School	210	34
Omagh Integrated Primary School	300	19
Oakgrove Integrated Primary School	385	15
Roe Valley Integrated Primary School	146	0
Carnlough Controlled Integrated Primary School	46	16
Glengormley Integrated Primary School	197	249
Crumlin Primary School	170	204
Ballymoney Controlled Integrated Primary School	245	169
Carhill Integrated Primary School	24	70

School name	(a) Places Filled	(b) Places Unfilled
Ballycastle Integrated Primary School	122	36
Rathenraw Integrated Primary School	49	174
Round Tower Integrated Primary School	264	12
Millstrand Integrated Primary School	155	77
Braidside Integrated Primary School	327	21
Corran Integrated Primary School	178	25
Acorn Integrated Primary School	201	2
Spires Integrated Primary School	197	9
Maine Integrated Primary School	106	14
Kircubbin Primary School	112	40
Portaferry Integrated Primary School	52	49
Bangor Central Primary School	556	0
Annsborough Primary School	57	28
Glencraig Integrated Primary School	220	32
Fort Hill Integrated Primary School	199	41
All Childrens Integrated Primary School	203	0
Loughview Integrated Primary School	395	11
Cedar Integrated Primary School	183	13
Oakwood Integrated Primary School	191	12
Millennium Integrated Primary School	186	17
Drumlins Integrated Primary School	100	16
Rowandale Integrated Primary School	80	0
Kilbroney Integrated Primary School	90	50
Bridge Integrated Primary School	389	17
Portadown Integrated Primary School	201	2
Windmill Integrated Primary School	195	15
Saints & Scholars Integrated Primary School	206	64
Phoenix Integrated Primary School	145	10
Hazelwood College	813	12
Malone Integrated College	704	96
Oakgrove Integrated College	790	10
Erne Integrated College	392	8
Drumragh College	580	0
Crumlin Integrated College	213	187

School name	(a) Places Filled	(b) Places Unfilled
Parkhall Integrated College	664	71
Slemish College	718	2
North Coast Integrated College	475	25
Ulidia Integrated College	489	11
Sperrin Integrated College	455	45
Priory College	450	0
Fort Hill College	846	4
Lagan College	1197	3
Shimna Integrated College	480	0
Strangford Integrated College	475	25
Blackwater Integrated College	260	140
Brownlow Integrated College	379	71
New-Bridge Integrated College	488	12
Integrated College Dungannon	447	53

Source: 2010 School Census / School Access Team

Figures exclude pupils in receipt of a statement of special educational needs and pupils admitted to Year 1 (primary) / Year 8 (post-primary) on appeal and pupils in their first year at a post-primary school following their admission by the direction of the Exceptional Circumstances Body as they are admitted over and above a school's approved enrolment number. Figures also exclude pupils admitted to a school by a temporary variation to a school's approved enrolment number.

Shared Sixth Form: Ballymoney

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the proposals for the provision of a shared sixth form for Ballymoney.

(AQW 1621/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Department of Education (DE) officials and representatives from the Ballymoney Learning Community met on June 9, 2011 and 4 August 2011 to discuss proposals for a shared sixth form for Ballymoney including the suggestion of a shared sixth form created by extra capacity at Dalriada School in the 2011/12 school year. The Department's response was to encourage a fuller and longer-term proposal on the basis that established procedures already exist for all schools to create extra capacity temporarily in order to meet demand for sixth form places.

DE supports the concept of a shared sixth-form in Ballymoney that will stop Ballymoney's young people having to seek post-16 provision elsewhere out of necessity rather than choice. DE also supports the positive integrative element of the proposal which seeks to bring together young people from maintained, controlled and grammar schools. In taking this forward detailed consideration needs to be given to a range of interests since the Ballymoney schools currently cater for young people from a wide catchment area beyond the immediate environs of Ballymoney.

Global Positioning System

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children who (i) now have to pay for a school bus pass which they had previously been awarded free of charge, broken down by

Education and Library Board; and (ii) have moved school as a result of the introduction of the use of the Global Positioning System, broken down by each Education and Library Board and each school year.
(AQW 1649/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Library Boards do not use the Global Positioning System (GPS) when assessing suitable routes to school for pupils. Rather, they use the Geographical Information System (GIS) which uses digitised Ordnance Survey maps to check the distance between a pupil's home and their school.

The Southern Education and Library Board has indicated that 14 pupils at first considered eligible for assistance with school transport, later had that assistance removed as the result of a reconsideration of the length of their route to school using GIS. The remaining Boards do not keep records of this information. The Boards also do not keep information in relation to concessionary seats granted to pupils, who subsequently have to give them up for the use of eligible pupils and who then may have to pay for a bus pass.

Information concerning the number of pupils who have moved school as a result of an application of GIS is not kept by the Boards.

Special Adviser

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 1548/11-15, the answer to which failed to provide the information requested, to now provide details of (i) how many candidates were considered for the post of Ministerial Special Adviser; (ii) what account was taken of any potential imbalance in religious background or gender in the pool from which he selected his Special Adviser; (iii) how wide was the trawl for candidates and how did he ensure that it was 'broadly based' as required by the Code of Practice on the Appointment of Special Advisers; and (iv) to publish the job description and person specification drawn up before the Special Adviser was appointed.

(AQW 1651/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I refer the member to the answer to AQW 1548/11-15 which was published in the Official Report on 29 July 2011.

Post-primary Schools: Entrance Exams

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of whether children sitting several entrance exams for post-primary schools, including exams for the Catholic maintained and controlled sector (i) is in the best interests of the children; and (ii) is sustainable in the long-term.

(AQW 1669/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I do not believe that it is in the best educational interests of children to be sitting any entrance test that is referenced to a school's admissions processes. Children should be able to access a first-rate education without the trauma and stress associated with sitting up to five test papers.

Our pupils should be academically challenged throughout their school career, but academic selection has been used to prevent young people from accessing schools. Instead I want to nurture the talents of all our young people and to ensure all schools provide a high standard of educational experience and build on pupils' individual abilities.

I want to see, and I am working towards, an equal system across the board where we have area planning to cater for the educational needs of all pupils, where we can look at our schools in a sustainable way, and where we have a fair and level playing field for all our schools in terms of admissions processes.

Education and Library Boards Employees

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Education (i) whether the Education and Library Boards are to pay employees, whose contracts include conditions of employment determined by the National Joint Council

for Local Government Services, an additional £250 during the 2011/12 financial year; and (ii) to detail the cost of these payments (a) in total; and (b) by each Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 1680/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I can confirm that the Education and Library Boards will pay employees, whose contracts include conditions of employment determined by the National Joint Council for Local Government Services, an additional £250 during the 2011/12 financial year subject to the approval process being completed by the Department of Finance and Personnel. This is a provision that has been made for low earners and will apply to those earning less than £21,000 full-time equivalent.

Table below details the cost of these payments:

	Accrual at 2010/11
BELB	£846,000
WELB	£757,242
NEELB	£815,000
SEELB	£742,545
SELB	£945,000
Total	£4,105,787

Non-teaching Posts

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Education to provide an estimate of (i) the number of non-teaching posts that may be lost during (a) this financial year; (b) the 2012/13 financial year; and (c) the 2013/14 financial year; and (ii) the savings that might result from reductions in non-teaching posts (a) in total; and (b) in each Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 1681/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The numbers of posts that may be lost during this year and future years is not yet known as Education & Library Boards' are currently working with my Department to assess the position and work through the statutory process for staff redundancies.

I can confirm, however, that the focus of my Savings Delivery Plan is on protecting frontline services as far as possible within an extremely constrained budget.

Bilingual Education

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the provision for bilingual education for children who are deaf or hard of hearing; and (ii) if his Department has any plans to improve services within schools for these children.

(AQW 1683/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have been advised by the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) that a comprehensive range of communication options are available for children who are deaf or hard of hearing and that educational audiology services recognise the right of parents to choose the communication approach they consider most appropriate for their child. ELBs provide bi-lingual education for children who are deaf or hard of hearing when this is the informed choice of the parents. A total communication approach is adopted for these children which focuses on:

- using the child's residual hearing to the full through prescribed hearing aids/cochlear implants/ other equipment;
- use of sign language to support the spoken word;
- the natural use of speech and language with the aim to develop the child's speech and language; and

- the use of all visual stimuli.

In certain instances ELBs may also provide a communication support worker or peripatetic teacher.

I have also been assured by the Boards that they constantly review all special educational needs services and improve these services where possible. ELBs are confident that the needs of any deaf or hard of hearing child, including those who require bi-lingual education, can be addressed.

Líofa 2015

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the funding allocated by his Department to the Líofa 2015 Project.

(AQW 1686/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am fully supportive of the Culture Minister's project to promote the Irish language and to encourage 1000 people to become fluent Irish speakers by 2015. My Department is already making an important contribution to this initiative through its ongoing support for the Irish-medium school sector and for related educational projects such as the Primary Languages Programme which give pupils in Foundation/Key Stage 1 the opportunity learn an additional language at school; and the An Gaelaras Leargas pilot programme which provides Key Stage 2 pupils in the Derry area with an opportunity to develop their knowledge of Irish language and culture.

I shall be pleased to continue to support Liofe 2015 in whatever ways might be possible through the education system.

Common Funding Formula

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education why changes have been made to the common funding formula that now makes schools liable for the total cost of employing a prematurely retired teacher.

(AQW 1693/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Changes have not been made to the Common Funding Formula arrangements for schools but rather schools were consulted earlier this year on proposals for changes to the centre substitution arrangements as detailed in the Common Funding Scheme, which took effect from 1 September 2011.

These changes sought to reflect recommendations made by the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) in their follow-up report on The Management of Substitution Cover for Teachers. In addressing the recommendations, the Department proposed a number of changes including making schools responsible for the total costs of re-employing prematurely retired teachers. This seeks to act as an incentive to schools to give preference to newly or recently qualified teachers in their substitution arrangements.

Newly Qualified Teachers

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what measures are being taken to maximise the employment opportunities for newly qualified teachers.

(AQW 1697/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am keen to ensure that newly qualified teachers (NQTs) are afforded every opportunity to not only gain permanent employment but also to gain further vital experience by providing substitute cover and by filling temporary vacancies.

To this end, my Department has introduced a range of measures to maximise the employment opportunities for NQTs, namely:

- Schools are repeatedly urged by the Department to give preference to newly qualified or experienced non-retired teachers seeking to return to employment when filling vacancies, including those of a temporary nature. Schools have also been advised that they should recruit to vacancies on a permanent rather than a temporary basis unless the vacancy is clearly of a temporary nature.

- From September 2010, the Department has monitored the re-employment of prematurely retired teachers on a monthly basis. Schools and employing authorities are routinely challenged when such employment occurs, and an explanation sought as to why such teachers are being re-employed in preference to NQTs.
- The Department has issued guidance to all employing authorities and schools advising that the Substitute Teachers' Register (NISTR) must be used when booking all substitute teachers. NISTR allows schools to identify younger teachers seeking employment as substitutes, and employing authorities to mount a more robust challenge where schools employ prematurely retired teachers.
- Employing authorities are now required to bear the costs of granting premature retirement to teachers. Over time, this will have the effect of reducing the stock of prematurely retired teachers available for work, meaning schools will need to look more frequently to newly qualified and other non-retired teachers for substitute cover and to fill temporary vacancies.

With effect from 1 September 2011, my Department has:

- introduced a flat rate of pay, based on salary levels applicable to NQTs, for substitution cover provided by prematurely retired teachers who have received discretionary compensation; and
- made amendments to the Common Funding Scheme which will further discourage the employment of prematurely retired teachers. These include charging the school's delegated budget for full cost of employing a prematurely retired teacher; and reducing the ceiling for centre reimbursement of teacher substitution costs from point 4 on the teachers' 6-point main pay scale to a maximum of point 3.

These changes should provide an enhanced incentive to schools to employ newly or recently qualified teachers as substitutes.

It is also important to ensure that the numbers joining approved initial teacher education (ITE) courses reflect the needs of our school system, both in the short and longer term, and thus represent value for money. In light of falling rolls, my Department has reduced the overall intakes to Initial Teacher Education courses from 880 in 2004/05 to 663 in 2011/12 – a reduction of nearly 25%. I will be giving careful consideration to the employment position of NQTs when setting the 2012-13 ITE intake numbers.

The Department will continue to monitor the impact of these arrangements to determine their effectiveness in achieving the anticipated outcome and will consider future adjustments to policy if necessary.

Homophobic Bullying in Schools

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what action his Department is taking to address homophobic bullying in schools.

(AQW 1698/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Bullying, in whatever form and for whatever reason, has no place in schools. The Department is committed to tackling this issue and is pro-active in examining ways to prevent it.

My Department's publication 'Pastoral Care in Schools: Promoting Positive Behaviour' offers detailed guidance, practical initiatives and case studies to support schools to tackle all forms of bullying.

All schools must to have a policy on how they will address Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in the curriculum, linking with their pastoral care policy and setting out the aims of the teaching programme, such as developing positive relationships, diversity and respect for others.

My Department continues to participate in the local Anti-Bullying Forum (NIABF) and the British and Irish Anti-Bullying Forum. The local Forum establishes working groups to deal with specific issues as need arises. In 2009, a homophobic bullying working group ensured that the Forum's website (www.niabf.org.uk) offered advice and guidance on this issue and produced a teacher fact sheet, which was distributed to all schools.

The Department also funds the regional coordinator post attached to the NIABF who is involved in delivering the 3-year Anti-Bullying Strategy. This year, Anti-Bullying Week will be from 14-18 November and the theme is cyber bullying. Activities include the dissemination of anti-bullying resource packs for schools, a competition for pupils to produce a poster or short movie around the theme and a Parents' Day to highlight the important role parents can play in tackling this issue.

The Inter-Board Group continues its work to develop a common approach to tackle all forms of bullying in schools. Last October, the group launched "Let's Stop Bullying", an inter-active CD-ROM developed for all primary and special schools, funded by the Department and made available through the C2K system.

The Department is now in receipt of the draft report on research on the nature and extent of bullying in schools here. This recent study repeats the approach used in 2002 and 2007 and the final report will enable trends over time to be established. The final report will be published by the end of the month.

Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual Young People: Education

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education how he intends to ensure that the education system is welcoming to young people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual.

(AQW 1700/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I expect our schools to be welcoming to all young people irrespective of their sexual orientation. All young people have the right to learn in a safe environment and to be treated with respect and dignity.

School Boards of Governors as well as principals and teachers have responsibilities to promote equality, good relations and diversity in schools and the wider community. These responsibilities are driven by the Department's education policies, education and employment legislation and anti-discrimination, human rights and equality legislation.

The teaching of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is an important element within the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (in primary schools) and the Learning for Life and Work (in post-primary) areas of learning in the revised curriculum. Through RSE, the curriculum contains sufficient scope to deal with sexual orientation. The curriculum also includes citizenship education, which lets pupils explore issues around diversity, inclusion and equality. Teachers have been trained in all requirements of the curriculum and guidance from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment makes schools aware of the wide range of RSE resources available. RSE is also inspected by the Education and Training Inspectorate.

The Department's Circular 2001/15 advises schools that they should have a policy setting out how they will address RSE within each pupil's curriculum. The policy should be the subject of consultation with parents, and should be endorsed by the school's Board of Governors. In developing or reviewing their RSE policies, schools have been advised by DE Circular 2010/01 to take account of guidance produced by the Equality Commission on Eliminating Sexual Orientation Discrimination.

The Department, and other Public Authorities involved with the education sector, are holding (or have held) consultations on their revised Equality Schemes and Audits of Inequalities/Action Plans. As the responses to these consultations will inform future policy development by, and between, organisations, I will ensure that I am satisfied that they take account of the concerns of all groups that represent Section 75 categories.

I take my responsibilities with regard to equality very seriously and I will ensure that policy makers within the Department take account of the latest Equality Commission guidance on Section 75 responsibilities and have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations.

Primary School Teachers

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education why primary teachers who qualify from St Mary's University College, Belfast are permitted to teach in any denomination of primary school while primary teachers qualifying from Stranmillis University College, Belfast cannot teach at Roman Catholic controlled primary schools; and what is the difference in the qualifications offered by these two colleges.

(AQW 1701/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: It is a requirement of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools that all those appointed to a permanent teaching position in a Catholic Maintained nursery or primary school should hold a recognised Certificate of Religious Education. All student teachers have the opportunity to access the Certificate of Religious Education course. Students at St Mary's University College may opt to take the Certificate during their initial teacher training at the College whilst students at Stranmillis University College may opt to acquire the Certificate by Distance Learning through a part-time course of study offered by the University of Glasgow. Alternatively, they can avail of the opportunity to acquire the Certificate from the Iona Retreat Centre in Derry or through a Life-light Home Study Course.

Both University Colleges offer similar routes into primary teaching through their generic Bachelor of Education and Post Graduate Certificate in Education programmes. Whilst there is no difference in the "qualified to teach" status of the teacher training qualifications offered by either College, the onus is on students to acquire the Certificate of Religious Education if they wish to seek employment in a Catholic maintained nursery or primary school.

Proposed Capital Projects

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 467/11-15, whether the work to consider how the available capital funds should be deployed will include criteria against which proposed capital projects will be assessed.

(AQW 1704/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I intend to make a statement to the Assembly in the near future on the challenges facing us in ensuring that we have a high quality education system. This will include consideration of how we can make the best use of the limited resources available in the best interest of children and young people through strategic planning and investment.

This work is ongoing.

Loreto Grammar School, Omagh

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what is the current position in relation to the court case taken by Loreto School in Omagh.

(AQW 1715/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: On 21 April 2011 the Department lodged an appeal against the decision of Mr Justice McCloskey of 25 March 2011 in respect of Loreto Grammar School, Omagh. The Appeal is listed for hearing at the Court of Appeal on the 26 and 30 September 2011. It is unknown when a ruling will be delivered thereafter.

Northern Irish History

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Education to outline the provision in the post-primary curriculum for the teaching of Northern Irish history.

(AQW 1727/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: History is a statutory requirement at Key Stage 3 and a qualification choice at Key Stage 4.

Under the statutory minimum content for history all post-primary schools are required to provide pupils at Key Stage 3 with the opportunities to investigate Irish and British historical periods including the

long and short term causes and consequences of the partition of Ireland and how it has influenced this State today, including key events and turning points.

At Key Stage 4 there is a significantly less curricular prescription in order to provide greater choice and flexibility for pupils. At Key Stage 4 and in sixth form it is for pupils to choose to study history.

Curricular Co-operation Between Schools

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) how many examples of curricular co-operation between schools have been notified to his Department in the last three years; (ii) of these, how many involve co-operation between Catholic maintained schools and other sectors; (iii) in how many cases has the range of subjects been enhanced or extended due to the co-operation; (iv) what plans he has to extend good practice in co-operation to areas which are currently not subject to curricular co-operation; and (v) in which geographical areas curricular co-operation between schools does not exist.

(AQW 1731/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department does not hold the information requested. Post primary schools do collaborate with each other, including those from the maintained and controlled sector, within area leaning communities to ensure that young people can have access to a much broader, better balanced and more economically relevant range of courses. I am fully committed to encouraging schools from all sectors to continue to work with each other and to plan a coherent curricular provision on an area basis. In a difficult resource context through working in partnership schools can pool resources, share their expertise and avoid duplication.

Teachers Due to Retire

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education how many teachers, currently in a teaching post, are due to retire in each of the next five years.

(AQW 1734/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Under the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations (NI) 2011, the Default Retirement Age of 65 has been removed. For those teachers who joined the Northern Ireland Teacher' Pension Scheme prior to 2007, the Normal Pension Age (NPA) remains at 60.

The table below details the number of teachers who will reach NPA in each of the next five years. It may reasonably be assumed that the majority of these teachers will retire when they become eligible to receive pension benefits.

FIGURES PROVIDED ARE IN FINANCIAL YEARS AND DO NOT INCLUDE VOLUNTARY GRAMMAR SCHOOLS.

	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017
Teachers due to reach age 60	572	632	676	671	596

Sex Education Advice Websites

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Education what provisions are in place to ensure that all secondary school aged pupils have access to websites offering sex education advice which reflects the realities and practicalities of teenage sexuality; and (ii) what measures are in place to ensure that websites offering support to young people who are lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender are not blocked by C2K filtering systems.

(AQW 1737/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As with all aspects of the revised curriculum, delivery of Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) is a matter for individual schools, taking account of the maturity and level of

understanding of their pupils. It is for schools to decide on the materials, including online resources, and programmes they wish to use to support the delivery of RSE, in accordance with their RSE policies.

Access to internet based resources within schools is provided through the C2k network. This access is fully monitored and websites are categorised in accordance with C2k's filtering policy which defines three types of access - Green, Amber and Red. Websites relating to content such as sex education, abortion, pro-life, gay, lesbian, bisexual are categorised as 'Sex Education' and as such fall into the 'Amber' group within the filtering policy. Post-primary schools which wish to use sites in the Amber group to support the delivery of their RSE programmes can request access to them from C2k.

Pupil Enrolment

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, for each of the last three years, including this school year, to detail the number of pupils enrolled in the (i) maintained; (ii) controlled; (iii) Irish-medium; (iv) voluntary grammar; and (v) integrated sectors, broken down by (a) primary school and post-primary school; and (b) Education and Library Board.

(AQW 1744/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested has been placed in the Assembly library. Information for the 2011/12 school year has not yet been collected by the Department and will be available in December. Information has therefore been provided for the years 2009/10 and 2010/11.

Teachers and Classroom Assistants

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, for each of the last three years, to detail the number of teachers and classroom assistants employed in the (i) maintained; (ii) controlled; (iii) Irish-medium; (iv) voluntary grammar; and (v) integrated sectors, broken down by (a) primary school and post-primary school; and (b) Education and Library Board.

(AQW 1745/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have arranged for the information to be placed in the Assembly Library.

Teacher Qualifications

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education to outline the difference in the training received and the qualifications gained by students at St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College who wish to teach in a primary school.

(AQW 1757/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: It is a requirement of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools that all those appointed to a permanent teaching position in a Catholic Maintained nursery or primary school should hold a recognised Certificate of Religious Education. All student teachers have the opportunity to access the Certificate of Religious Education course. Students at St Mary's University College may opt to take the Certificate during their initial teacher training at the College whilst students at Stranmillis University College may opt to acquire the Certificate by Distance Learning through a part-time course of study offered by the University of Glasgow. Alternatively, they can avail of the opportunity to acquire the Certificate from the Iona Retreat Centre in Derry or through a Life-light Home Study Course.

Both University Colleges offer similar routes into primary teaching through their generic Bachelor of Education and Post Graduate Certificate in Education programmes. Whilst there is no difference in the "qualified to teach" status of the teacher training qualifications offered by either College, the onus is on students to acquire the Certificate of Religious Education if they wish to seek employment in a Catholic maintained nursery or primary school.

Orange Order Website

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what steps his Department is taking to enable schools to access the Orange Order website.

(AQW 1762/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: C2k is a directorate of the Western Education and Library Board which provides all grant-aided schools with a managed ICT service, including access to the internet, through contracts with private sector providers. The service operates an internet filtering policy to keep pupils safe when on-line, and the Websense software used has default settings which automatically sift websites into a number of categories. On the basis of these categories, C2k filtering policy permits or denies access. The filtering software initially put the Orange Order's website into a category to which access was refused, but some seven years ago C2k found that the site had been blocked and, after discussions with the Order, they asked the provider of this aspect of the service to allow access.

However, C2k were alerted on 8 September 2011 that only post-primary schools were able to access the site. They have now taken the necessary steps with the provider of this aspect of the service to rectify the situation with regard to primary schools.

It is common for websites which schools wish to use to be located in categories which are blocked. Equally, schools often come across sites which they think should be blocked. C2k have arrangements in place for schools to request blocking or unblocking, on an individual or collective basis, through the C2k Helpdesk.

Irish-language Schools

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of (i) applications; and (ii) approvals for Irish-Language Medium Schools in the Mid Ulster area; and to provide details of the successful applications.

(AQW 1776/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In the last thirteen years in the Mid Ulster area:

- (i) There have been 9 applications in total from 6 schools.
- (ii) These resulted in 6 approvals as set out in the table below:

School	Decision
Gaelscoil Uí Neill	Second application approved
Gaelscoil na Speiríní	First application approved but school failed to achieve minimum intake
Gaelscoil na Speiríní	Second application approved
Bunscoil Ui Chléirigh *	First application approved
Gaelscoil an tSeanchaí	Second application approved
Gaelscoil Aodhua Rua	First application approved

* did not open

Preschool Spaces

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Education for an update on the removal of the priority preschool spaces given to children with July/August birthdays for the 2012-13 academic year.

(AQW 1779/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In a debate in the Assembly on 7 June 2011 I committed to a review of the procedures for admission to pre-school places. This review is considering a range of issues, including the priority given

to children with July and August birthdays in the allocation of funded pre-school places. That review is currently underway and once finalised I will consider how the recommendations might be taken forward taking into account the resource implications of any changes and the need for legislative amendment.

Teachers: Sick Leave

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education how many teachers were on sick leave for a period of over three months during the 2010/11 school term but reported back to work in June 2011.

(AQW 1857/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There were 113 teachers on sick leave for a period of over three months during the 2010/2011 school term who reported back to work in June 2011.

This figure does not include teachers in Voluntary Grammar Schools.

Pupils Suspended and Expelled

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education how many pupils have been (i) suspended; and (ii) expelled from post-primary schools in each of the last three years, broken down by education sector.

(AQW 1880/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department collects statistics on suspensions and expulsions from each of the Education and Library Boards annually. The statistics for the last school year, 2010/11, have been collected and are currently being analysed by the Department. The data will be published on the Department's website (www.deni.gov.uk) in due course.

The information requested for the previous three school years is provided in the tables below:

(I) PUPILS SUSPENDED FROM POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS:

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Controlled	1,935	1,806	1,787
Catholic Maintained	1,739	1,627	1,567
Other	1,299	1,113	1,171
Total	4,973	4,546	4,525

(II) PUPILS EXPELLED FROM POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS:

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Controlled	*	10	*
Catholic Maintained	15	16	12
Other	#	9	#
Total	24	35	22

Notes:

- For the purpose of statistical collection, school management types are amalgamated into three groups: 'Controlled', 'Catholic Maintained' or 'Other'. The 'Other' classification includes grant maintained and controlled integrated schools, voluntary grammar schools and other maintained schools. Data for independent schools is not available.
- Figures include pupils undertaking Key Stages 3 & 4 in post-primary schools only. For special schools pupils, curriculum year is used as a proxy for Key Stage.

3. * denotes figures less than 5. Small numbers are suppressed to prevent identification of an individual in line with the confidentiality principle of the Statistics Authority's Code of Practice on Official Statistics.
4. # denotes a figure which has been treated to prevent disclosure of small numbers elsewhere.
5. Figures relate to the number of pupils suspended. The number of actual suspensions will be larger as pupils can be suspended more than once.

Department for Employment and Learning

Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education requested to become tenants at the Stranmillis College site.

(AQW 1572/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): This is information that my Department does not hold and I have asked Stranmillis University College to provide the answer.

The College has informed me that it was approached by the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education about the possibility of renting some accommodation at Stranmillis. There were some initial examinations of possible options by the College but it did not prove possible to reach agreement on a viable option given the Council's needs.

As a result, no formal proposal was ever brought forward to the Governing Body and I understand the Council obtained accommodation elsewhere.

Maximum Student Number (MaSN) Cap: Queen's University, Belfast

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he plans an increase in the Maximum Student Number (MaSN) cap for Queen's University, Belfast.

(AQW 1663/11-15)

Dr Farry: Following the recent Executive agreement on tuition fees in Northern Ireland, I only have limited funds available to increase student numbers across all the Higher Education providers.

I will be discussing how best to implement any increase with the providers in the near future.

Evening Classes

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he will reinstate concessionary fees for elderly people who wish to attend evening classes.

(AQW 1664/11-15)

Dr Farry: European Directive 2000/78/EC precludes Further Education Colleges from offering universal age-based fee concessions.

All six Colleges are continuing to provide concessionary fees to individuals, including older people, on a means tested basis, which reflects learners' ability to pay.

International Students

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) how many of the students enrolled in higher education in Northern Ireland are international students; and (ii) how many of them receive financial assistance.

(AQW 1666/11-15)

Dr Farry:

- (i) In 2009/10, there were 1,605 international students enrolled at Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions.
- (ii) International students studying in Northern Ireland do not receive financial assistance or support from the Department for Employment and Learning.

Regional Colleges

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of applications to each Regional College, including Belfast Metropolitan College; and the number of admissions in each for this academic year.

(AQW 1773/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Department does not hold the information requested by the member; applications and admissions are a matter for each individual Further Education (FE) college.

I have passed your query to the six College Directors who have agreed to respond to you directly.

16- to 25-year-olds not in Employment, Education or Training

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what percentage of people aged 16-25 years old are not in employment, education, or training.

(AQW 1783/11-15)

Dr Farry: Estimates of the number of people in Northern Ireland not in education, employment, or training are derived from the Labour Force Survey (LFS). The latest figures for Quarter 2 2011 estimate that there were 19.1% (48,000) of all those aged 16-25 in Northern Ireland who were not in employment, participating in government training schemes or in full-time education. It is not possible to identify separately those in part-time education or non-government sponsored training.

Success Through Skills

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the development of the Success through Skills - Transforming Futures implementation plan.

(AQO 271/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland 'Success through Skills – Transforming Futures' was launched on the 25 May at my Department's annual skills conference.

Since then, I have been working to ensure that the implementation of the Strategy builds on my Department's existing work in this area and helps to bring about the step change required if we are to have a skilled workforce which will meet the future needs of local employers.

I intend to make a statement to the Assembly in the near future outlining how my Department is implementing 'Transforming Futures'.

However, a number of projects which aim to encourage more employers to buy in to the skills agenda and up-skill their workforce are already being taken forward, after successful pilot phases. These include the Skills Solutions service and Assured Skills.

DEL: Capital Projects

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what capital projects his Department has planned for North Belfast in each of the next four years.

(AQO 272/11-15)

Dr Farry: The University of Ulster has planned a redevelopment of its North Belfast campus. Construction work is expected to commence at the York Street site in 2013, with a completion date

of 2018. The Department has already contributed £16m over the last 2 years towards the estimated £250m cost of the project.

In addition, the Belfast Metropolitan College is in the process of delivering a Workforce and Economic Development Centre on the Springfield Rd which will benefit the whole community of North Belfast. This £16m facility will be operational from January 2012.

The Northern Regional College has also recently completed a £10m investment at its Newtownabbey campus and this was fully funded by the Department.

DEL: Employment Service

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline any pressures being faced by the Employment Service.

(AQO 274/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Employment Service is facing considerable pressures. The Service is staffed to deal with an unemployment register of 35,000 people. The August Labour Market Report published by the Department of Finance and Personnel indicates a current claimant count of 60,400, an increase of almost 73%.

In addition, there has been a substantial increase in demand for Steps to Work – the Department's main adult back to work programme. In 2009/10, 18,000 people started the programme. This rose to almost 27,000 in 2010/11: an increase of 49%. Also, people are staying on the programme longer: occupancy rates have risen by 76% in the last year.

The Department has a fixed budget for these services and programmes. The rise in demand means that the quality of services on offer is being gradually reduced as the Department reduces provision to live within budget.

Northern Ireland's needs are greater than the rest of the UK: the NI claimant count rate is current 6.8% compared to a UK rate of 4.9%. The economic inactivity rate here is 26.6% compared to a UK average of 23.2%. These figures argue for more investment in back to work support locally compared to Great Britain.

University of Ulster: Magee Campus

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many applications from students in Northern Ireland were received by the University of Ulster in 2011 for courses at the Magee Campus; and how many of these applications were successful.

(AQO 275/11-15)

Dr Farry: The University of Ulster has informed my Department that there were 5,786 applications through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), from 4,072 Northern Ireland domiciled applicants, for entry to full time undergraduate courses at Magee in academic year 2011/12. Students can include up to five choices on their application form and there is no preference order.

A total of 1,111 applicants received and firmly accepted a conditional offer and, up to 5 September 2011, 727 Northern Ireland domiciled students have been offered and have accepted places at Magee.

Regional Colleges: Foundation Degrees

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the number and type of Foundation Degree courses which are available in Regional Colleges.

(AQO 276/11-15)

Dr Farry: At present a total of 75 Foundation Degree courses are delivered across the six Further Education Regional Colleges. Thirty one of these are full-time courses and the remaining 44 are delivered through part-time provision.

My Department has focussed resources on the development of Foundation Degrees in a number of priority skills areas, namely, Leadership and Management, Financial Services, Information Communication Technology, Construction & the Built Environment and Engineering.

Other vocational areas where Foundation Degrees are currently available are Hospitality & Tourism and Applied & Medical Science, Sports & Fitness, Early Years Care, and Counselling.

A Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland is being developed and I intend to publish it this Autumn. It will propose an increase in the number of students studying Foundation Degrees, particularly those studying part-time.

Broadband: Rural Areas

Mr Lynch asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the work undertaken by his Department to address barriers to employment as a consequence of poor broadband provision in some rural areas.

(AQO 277/11-15)

Dr Farry: While access to broadband is the responsibility of the Department for Enterprise Trade and Investment, I do not believe that its availability or the lack of it, in rural areas constitutes a barrier to employment. Evidence, however, shows that the most effective means of engaging the unemployed with work is through regular, face to face contact with a skilled personal adviser service. It is for this reason that the Employment Service operates a system of fortnightly job search reviews and regular work-focused interviews for those claiming benefits.

Comprehensive service provision across Northern Ireland is provided through a network of 35 Jobs & Benefits Offices and Jobcentres. As well as a face to face service, this network also offers opportunities for people to look for jobs via jobcentre online which can be accessed through kiosks located in each office.

All six of our Further Education Colleges have 1 Gigabit (1,000 Megabits) internet circuits, and only 30 of the 600 colleges across the UK have such a high level of capacity. Our universities have similar capacity. Students are able to take advantage of this technology.

Higher Education: Rural Areas

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how his Department plans to help people living in rural areas to overcome barriers to participation in higher education.

(AQO 278/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department has no evidence to suggest that participation in higher education is any lower among people from a rural background; indeed the available statistics suggest a slightly higher participation rate for people living in rural areas over those from urban areas.

That said, my Department's aim is to ensure that higher education and the opportunities that it brings should be available to all those who have the ability to benefit from it regardless of their background or location.

My Department supports the delivery of higher education in Northern Ireland's six Further Education Regional Colleges as it provides "close-to-home" study through part-time, distance or web-based learning, allowing flexible higher education for learners from communities who might otherwise face significant barriers to participating in higher education.

My Department is currently developing a strategy for widening participation in higher education following a recent public consultation on the issue. My officials will take account of the issues raised through the consultation responses, including those responses which suggested that, in future, there should be more emphasis on community based initiatives to widen participation and, in particular, that there is a need for more outreach by the higher education sector including targeted engagement with groups and communities in low participation areas.

The widening participation strategy will be published later this year as part of an overarching Higher Education strategy for Northern Ireland.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Crescent Capital II

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she is aware of the carrying value of investments in the Crescent Capital II fund that would enable her to project if InvestNI might be expected to receive repayment to its subordinated investment in Crescent Capital II; and for a breakdown of the value of these funds and other liquid capital in Crescent Capital II's most recent accounts.

(AQW 1591/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): The UK government has recognised that, with the possible exception of London and SE England, there is market failure in seed and early stage funding throughout the UK. A range of initiatives has been developed to address this failure within NI, which is estimated to extend to deals of up to £2m in any 12 month period.

Invest NI's approach to venture capital is to intervene where there is a recognised market failure, by providing funding when required in order to attract private investment to SMEs. Companies suitable for VC investment in NI must have high growth potential and be able to identify future options for an exit, possibly a trade sale, IPO etc. They must be substantially based in NI and must contribute to the NI economy.

Crescent Capital II Fund was established in March 2004. It is a £22.5m fund, of which 90% has been drawn down, and Invest NI is a 33% investor alongside a number of private investors.

At this point in the Fund life, it is not possible to accurately project if Invest NI will receive repayment of its subordinated investment in Crescent Capital II, however the Fund had made four successful exits as at 31 March 2011, the total sales proceeds of which were £8,468k. The Fund will continue to manage out its existing investments until April 2014.

The net asset value of Crescent Capital II LP as at 31 March 2011 was £8,016,900, of which total investments were valued at £7,537,403. It should be noted that Crescent Capital follows British Venture Capital Association guidelines when valuing its investments and future realisation proceeds may not reflect the carrying value of investments.

Utility Companies

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what procedures her Department has in place to ensure that utility companies laying pipes or cables in the ground comply with current legislation to ensure the safety of the general public and persons excavating below ground.

(AQW 1598/11-15)

Mrs Foster: DETI, through the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland, has in place a range of procedures arising from regulations covering gas pipeline safety and the safety of the electricity supply. These procedures include the assessment of safety cases, inspection of laying activities and the investigation of incidents.

Utility Companies

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many prosecutions have been pursued against utility companies or their contractors in each of the last five years for non-compliance with health and safety regulations when replacing, maintaining or laying underground services.

(AQW 1599/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In the past five years there have been no prosecutions of utility companies or their contractors, for breaches of health and safety regulations, in regard to the installation or repair of underground services.

Electricity Providers

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions her Department has had with electricity providers in relation to pricing.

(AQW 1679/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Power NI's electricity tariffs are subject to formal regulation by the Utility Regulator, and, while my Department does not have a formal role in the tariff review process, as part of the Utility Regulator's scrutiny of the Power NI tariff proposals, my officials have attended meetings over the summer period involving Power NI, the Utility Regulator, and the Consumer Council.

Airtricity, which is the other major electricity supplier operating in the domestic supply market in Northern Ireland, has also announced that its prices are to increase, and my officials have had discussions with the company in relation to their recent announcement.

Both the Power NI and Airtricity price increases are disappointing and challenging for both business and domestic consumers, especially in the current difficult economic climate. However rises in the wholesale cost of generation fuels, resulting in increased power generation costs, are primarily responsible for the increase in retail electricity tariffs.

Gas Pipeline

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans are in place to extend the gas pipeline beyond the ten original towns that were connected to the supply-line and to the smaller towns and villages of North Antrim.

(AQW 1741/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In late June 2011, my Department issued a consultation inviting views from the energy industry and the wider community on the potential for extending the natural gas network in Northern Ireland to areas which are currently without gas. Details on the consultation, which closes on 30 September 2011, can be found on the Department's website at www.detini.gov.uk.

Electricity Consumers

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the impact on electricity consumers resulting from the local market being dominated by state owned businesses in the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 1753/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The electricity supply market in Northern Ireland has been fully opened for business customers since 2005, allowing them to buy their electricity supply from a number of supply companies, offering choice and the ability to negotiate preferential contracts. The wholesale electricity market has been operating since establishment of the Single Electricity Market in November 2007, when the domestic electricity supply market in Northern Ireland was also opened. Both these markets operate on the basis of competitive pricing, which takes no account of the ownership of companies.

Companies participating in the Northern Ireland electricity market which are not in competition, are subject to regulation by the Utility Regulator in line with its statutory functions.

Electricity Prices

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of what the next pressure point will be that could lead to a further rise in electricity prices.

(AQO 284/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Electricity price movements from one tariff period to the next are mainly driven by the cost of generation fuels. Increases in power generation costs have resulted in higher retail electricity tariffs.

The recent volatility and increase in wholesale fuel prices has been driven by worldwide events such as the tsunami and earthquake in Japan affecting the availability of nuclear power and hence the demand for oil and gas. There is also the ongoing instability in the Middle East and North Africa. Any further increase in the cost of international wholesale fuel costs would therefore put additional pressure on retail electricity prices.

The Utility Regulator will continue to work with Power NI to monitor any fluctuations in wholesale energy prices and will, if appropriate, review the tariffs in-year.

Trade: Exports

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans her Department has to develop export relationships and consult with emerging economies such as China, India and Israel in order to help Northern Ireland's economic revival.

(AQO 285/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI's well-established overseas market visit programme encourages and supports Northern Ireland companies to increase their sales in existing overseas markets or to enter new markets. In this year's comprehensive programme there are over 60 international trade events to over 30 countries worldwide, with a focus on China and India as well as emerging markets of Brazil and Kurdistan.

Northern Ireland companies wanting to learn of and access business opportunities in Israel can, with the support of Invest NI, do so by using the services of UK Trade and Investment.

Invest NI's Foreign Direct Investment efforts are continually reviewed in order to take advantage of emerging opportunities, particularly from the so-called group of emerging economies.

Broadband

Mr Murphy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on her Department's plans to secure 100% broadband coverage.

(AQO 286/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Through investments made by my Department, it has been the case than since December 2005 every household and every business in Northern Ireland has had the opportunity to access a broadband service. For 99% of premises broadband access is available through fixed line technology, whilst for the remainder of premises access is provided via a mix of wireless technologies, including satellite.

City of Culture 2013

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she has considered establishing a task force within her Department to assist businesses in taking full advantage of the UK City of Culture 2013.

(AQO 287/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Londonderry's status as the first UK City of Culture in 2013 will present a range of opportunities to businesses in the city and the wider North West region. This requires a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach from my Department, through both Invest Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. However, I do not consider that it is necessary to establish a task force.

Alongside the obvious possibilities for businesses operating in the tourism sector, there is also an opportunity to use Londonderry's tenure as UK City of Culture to present the city and wider region in the best possible light to potential inward investors. Invest Northern Ireland will be working with existing investors and local stakeholders to maximize this opportunity.

Green New Deal

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions she has had with her Executive colleagues on developing a Green New Deal strategy.

(AQO 288/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Executive colleague, Nelson McCausland, is in the lead on this matter and his department chairs the Inter-departmental Working Group established to take work on Green New Deal forward.

Energy efficiency and the creation of jobs are clearly very important for my department as well and I met with Minister McCausland in June to discuss current issues and progress on the development of the Green New Deal proposal and also other alternatives including the separate Green Deal which is being rolled out in Great Britain.

Business: Research and Development

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action her Department plans to take to increase the number of local businesses that will benefit from the EU 7th Framework Programme to develop research and development projects.

(AQO 289/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In partnership with key stakeholders, my Department is currently undertaking a review of the support mechanisms available to local organizations who wish to participate in the EU 7th Framework Programme.

That review, which will be completed in October is expected to recommend new measures that will among other things provide further support to local companies who want to apply for Framework funding. This will build on the ongoing support which Invest NI currently provides.

Electricity Prices: Tyrone-Cavan Interconnector

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the impact on future electricity prices should the Tyrone/Cavan interconnector not proceed.

(AQO 290/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The lack of a second electricity interconnector costs an estimated £18million to £25million per year, due to technical constraints in the transmission network. This restricts use of the most efficient gas power plants, increasing wholesale costs and ultimately retail prices in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The second line will improve system reliability and double transmission capacity and the flow of electricity from the most modern plants. This will promote competitiveness in the Single Electricity Market and help keep electricity prices as low as possible.

Business: Training

Mr Girvan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the uptake of, and support available for, staff training to help small and medium sized enterprises improve their competitiveness.

(AQO 291/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI offers a range of tailored support to assist businesses with staff training and improving their competitiveness.

In the last three years, Invest NI's Business Improvement Training Programme has offered over £27 million of support to Invest NI clients to undertake training focused on the development of the strategic direction of their business.

The Interim Management programme offers SMEs support to engage experienced managers to deliver specific business improvement projects. In the last three years, the 143 projects supported identified

significant benefits including £14.9 million in increased sales, a £3.2 million reduction in costs, £3 million in increased R&D expenditure and the creation of almost 70 new jobs.

Invest NI also provides both general and company specific training in 'lean principles' and, in the last two years, 180 companies have participated in the programme, 88% of whom were from SMEs. The identified value added benefits to date include £4.5 million of efficiency savings with the potential for a further £8 million to come from on-going projects

A range of other training is also available to SMEs including People Solutions workshops which are focused on improving productivity, product quality, customer satisfaction and business performance. In addition, the nibusinessinfo.co.uk website also offers a number of free online training modules covering all key aspects of owning and operating a business.

Manufacturing: South Tyrone

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assistance her Department is giving to the manufacturing industry in the South Tyrone area; and for her assessment of the future of the manufacturing industry in general.

(AQO 292/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I am pleased to say that there have been a number of recent successes in manufacturing companies in South Tyrone. In January this year, I officially opened a new retail pack facility at Linden Foods in Dungannon. This £8 million investment will create 85 new jobs and help the company grow its sales by an additional £30 million. Last week, I attended the launch of Westland Horticulture's innovative new peat free product range which is proposed to create up to 23 new jobs and increase the company's sales by £22 million.

It is particularly encouraging that exciting new export-focused companies continue to emerge from across the constituency such as Ballygawley based Irish Manufacturing Services which designs, develops and produces equipment for the mining and quarrying sectors, and Cookstown's CDE Global and its new spin-out company CDEnviro, which designs and supplies equipment for the sewage and waste water treatment industries.

The support these businesses have received from Invest NI emphasises that manufacturing remains a key sector for Northern Ireland. A wide range of support is available from Invest NI to enable them to grow their business, maximise efficiencies, undertake further product development and equip them with the skills and support to sell their products in export markets.

Tourism: Golf

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline her Department's targets in terms of additional visitors and increased visitor spend as a result of the recent success of local professional golfers.

(AQO 293/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The emerging Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland sets ambitious targets to double the current contribution tourism makes to the economy to £1 billion and to increase visitor numbers from 3.2million to 4.5million by 2020. These targets have become even more challenging given the downturn in global tourism over the last few years. The recent successes of our local professional golfers will act as an important lever to help us reach our goals. Both NITB and Tourism Ireland are focused on growing the number of golf tourists to Northern Ireland in 2011 and beyond.

Department of the Environment

George Best Belfast City Airport

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment whether he or his officials met with personnel from the George Best Belfast City Airport during 2011 when a proposed indicative noise contour was discussed; and if so, on what dates did such meetings take place.

(AQW 1631/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): My officials met with representatives of George Best Belfast City Airport on 3 February, 28 June, and on 4, 18 and 25 August 2011 to discuss planning issues at the airport including the establishment of an indicative noise control contour. I attended the meeting on 25 August 2011. I anticipate that I will be in a position to make an announcement in relation to this matter in the near future.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Code of Practice on the Appointment of Special Advisers

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) for his assessment of whether the Code of Practice on the Appointment of Special Advisers has been followed by all Ministers; and (ii) what steps his Department took to ensure that the Code was complied with during the recent appointments of Special Advisers.

(AQW 1551/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Whether the guidance contained in the Code of Practice on the Appointment of Special Advisers was followed is a matter for each individual Minister as the Appointing Authority. My Department therefore did not take steps to monitor the use of this guidance during the recent appointments of Special Advisers. However, DFP will have a monitoring role as proposed under the terms of the recent review into the appointment of Special Advisers.

Government Departments: Staff

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of staff, by grade, who have left Government Departments, their agencies and arms-length bodies in each of the last three years; (ii) the total of the lump sums received by these staff; and (iii) all other additional payments or enhancements received.

(AQW 1603/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The number of staff who have left Government Departments, their agencies and arms-length bodies in each of the last three years by grade is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

However the information requested, but not specified by grade, is contained in the annual Department of Finance and Personnel Superannuation and Other Allowances Resource Accounts which are laid in the Assembly and published on the Department of Finance and Personnel website: www.dfpi.gov.uk.

Energy Efficiency Homes Scheme

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) what savings have been made in the current financial year by ending the Energy Efficiency Homes Scheme; and (ii) when these savings will be allocated to the Green New Deal Project.

(AQW 1623/11-15)

Mr Wilson: It is too early to determine the final level of savings that will be made throughout the year.

Land and Property Services have advised me, however, that discharges to the rate account 2010/11 at 31 March were £93,525, by comparison discharges associated with cases processed in 2011/12, as at 4 September, were £53,475.

The savings will increase over the coming months, as cases that were in the system prior to the closure date are dealt with. Furthermore, I listened to the views of those affected by the decision and agreed a 3 month period of grace so that no one was disadvantaged, so the final closure was not long ago on the 30 June 2011.

Savings from the scheme, both in terms of revenue and the final position relating to administrative savings, will only be allocated to Green New Deal following a positive assessment of the business case by DSD and DFP. The wider business case is currently being prepared by the Green New Deal Group and will be submitted to DSD in due course.

Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Scheme

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Scheme.

(AQW 1650/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Reclaim Fund announced on 2nd August 2011 that the first tranche to be transferred to the Big Lottery Fund will be £30million of which Northern Ireland will receive a Barnett share.

It is expected that distributions from the Reclaim Fund in the first year will be between £60-100 million of which Northern Ireland will receive a Barnett share. I have no further information at this stage on the scale or timing of future transfers as future releases will depend on the rate of reclaim.

I am awaiting confirmation of the funding available for Northern Ireland from the first tranche.

Special Advisers

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, for each of the last three years, to detail the cost of the annual gross salary and related expenses for each departmental Special Adviser appointed by Ministers from (i) the Democratic Unionist Party; (ii) Sinn Fein; and (iii) the Alliance Party.

(AQW 1653/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Information on the remuneration of Special Advisers is published annually in the Note on Staff Numbers and Related Costs in Departments' Annual Resource Accounts. Information on related expenses is not held for individual members of staff.

Small Business Rate Relief Scheme

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many responses have been received to the consultation on the proposed extension of the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme; and to outline the steps for taking the proposal forward.

(AQW 1748/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I launched the consultation exercise, seeking views on changes to the rating of commercial properties, on 28 June 2011.

At the time of writing there have been six substantive responses, as well as several meetings between the business sector and my Department.

I want people to take their time in responding to the proposals, since I have been asking the business community to provide evidence as well as views on the various points raised by the consultation. This includes consideration of the proposals for a levy on the largest shops, which is needed to fund the enlargement of the small business rate relief scheme.

Consultation does not close until 18 October 2011, and I fully expect a marked increase in responses over the coming weeks, following the end of the summer period.

Following the close of consultation, and subject to its outcomes, it is my intention to implement the 'downturn' proposals set out in the consultation paper at the start of the next rating year on 1 April 2012. This would, however, be dependent upon Assembly and Executive approval. To meet this tight deadline I will be asking for accelerated passage for the legislation to implement the large shops levy.

Census

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when the information gathered in the recent Census will be announced.

(AQW 1809/11-15)

Mr Wilson: It is currently planned that the first results from the 2011 Census will be available in July 2012. These will provide a new estimate of the total number of people living in Northern Ireland, broken down by age and gender, along with estimates for local administrative areas.

Special Advisers

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total gross salary, including expenses, for each departmental Special Adviser in each year since 8 May 2007 to date.

(AQW 1846/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Information on the remuneration of Special Advisers is published annually in the Note on Staff Numbers and Related Costs in Departments' Annual Resource Accounts. Information on related expenses is not held for individual members of staff.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Hospitals: Admissions

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people aged 65 and over were admitted to hospital between 1994 and 1999 compared to the number admitted between 2000 and 2005.

(AQW 1567/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Information regarding the number of people aged 65 and over who were admitted to hospital is not available.

Information is however available on the number of inpatient and day case admissions to hospitals under the acute programme of care where the patient was aged 65 and over as shown in the table below;

Year	Admissions
1994 to 1999	622,007
2000 to 2005	866,118

Source: Hospital Inpatient System

It should be noted that any individual could have been admitted to hospital more than once during any given time period and would therefore be counted more than once in the above figures.

Clinical Psychiatric Services for Children with Asperger's Syndrome

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the availability of Clinical Psychiatric services for children with Asperger's Syndrome in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 1583/11-15)

Mr Poots: All Health and Social Care Trusts provide services to children with Asperger's Syndrome either through their Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Team or through Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). All Trusts have access to child psychiatry services either within their own Trust or through CAMHS in the Belfast Trust. Psychiatric services only become involved in cases where complex or co-morbid circumstances complicate either diagnosis or treatment.

Antrim Area Hospital: Accident and Emergency

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the measures in place to assist the Antrim Area Hospital Accident and Emergency Unit until the new Unit opens in 2013. **(AQW 1605/11-15)**

Mr Poots: Pending the construction of the new A&E Department, which is scheduled for completion in 2013, the Northern Trust has put in place a range of measures to provide additional support for the management of people who access the A&E department in Antrim Area hospital.

These include changes to the physical layout of the A&E Department, recruitment of consultants to Acute Medicine and the provision of 14 additional inpatient beds which will be ready for use in December 2011. In addition an Elderly Care Assessment unit, Early Pregnancy Assessment unit and an Ambulatory Care Pathway are currently under development.

These and other measures form part of an overall plan progressed in collaboration with key stakeholders to ensure the provision of safe and sustainable services pending the construction of the new A&E Unit.

Allied Health Professional Courses

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action is taken to recover fees paid to universities for students undertaking Allied Health professional courses when the student does not complete the course. **(AQW 1624/11-15)**

Mr Poots: Students do not complete courses for a variety of reasons, including academic failure. When a student fails to complete, the costs of tuition fees are not recovered. The Department and the University of Ulster maintain a contract with costs based upon the lowest AHP fee costs in the UK and low attrition.

Budgetary Savings Process

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what indicators he intends to put in place to measure the impact on service delivery of any budgetary cuts made as part of the overall budgetary savings process. **(AQW 1626/11-15)**

Mr Poots: We are in a very difficult financial context and all departments are faced with the challenge of providing services and making savings within the resources approved by the Executive and the Assembly. My primary focus is on improving the quality of health and social care services and outcomes for service users, whilst making sure that we live within our means, and are as efficient and effective as possible. We need to look critically at what we are doing currently and in some cases what we should be doing instead.

The targets and indicators of performance I set for the sector have a focus on achieving outcomes, and on levels of quality and access to the service, from the resources that have been allocated. I intend that the Health and Social Care Review which I have commissioned recently should provide the basis for setting longer term priorities and objectives, and changes in the delivery of services required to provide quality care over the coming years.

Health Service: In-year Financial Shortfall

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the in-year health service financial shortfall for the Health Service.

(AQW 1627/11-15)

Mr Poots: My department faces a considerable financial challenge both in 2011/12 and in future years. As in any year, financial forecasts are subject to continuous review and a range of measures will be necessary to manage this pressure so as to live within the available resources. I remain exceptionally concerned about the ability to provide a sustained, high quality health and social care service within the DHSSPS Budget allocations. I have therefore initiated the Review of Health and Social Care to make recommendations on the future provision of services including our acute hospital configuration; the development of primary health care services and social care and the interfaces between the sectors.

Health Funds: In-year Monitoring

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) whether he has had any discussions with the Minister of Finance and Personnel on additional funding for his Department; and (ii) whether he has agreed with his Executive colleagues a schedule for the allocation of in-year monitoring funds to health funds.

(AQW 1628/11-15)

Mr Poots: I have had a number of discussions with the First Minister regarding my Department's budget, some of which were attended by the Minister of Finance and Personnel. In addition, I met with the Minister of Finance and Personnel in July to discuss pressures on my Department's capital budget.

My Department is also working closely with the Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit within the Department of Finance and Personnel. PEDU is providing support to my Department in the delivery of high quality services whilst securing the budgetary savings needed up to 2014-15, with a focus on 2011/12.

Under the In Year Monitoring guidelines for 2011/12, my Department can only submit bids for additional funding in the event of major and unforeseeable circumstances. In this context, inputs to the forthcoming October Monitoring Round are currently being considered and work is underway in assessing my Department's proposed requirements and approach. Once this process has been completed, I will have further discussions with my Executive colleagues regarding my Department's funding position.

Back-office Functions

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he has had any discussions with his counterparts in other parts of the UK on how back office functions might be rationalised between them, effecting financial savings.

(AQW 1629/11-15)

Mr Poots: I have not been involved in any discussions with my UK counterparts on this subject. However, the Health & Social Care (HSC) Business Services Transformation Programme is well advanced and aims to modernise 'back office' functions and, in doing so, deliver significant financial savings. In taking this work forward, a number of possible approaches were studied. These included an examination of the potential for the HSC to receive shared services from an external organisation (such as an NHS shared business services organisation) or a Northern Ireland public sector shared service organisation.

On a related point, the Business Service Organisation, which has responsibility for providing many back office functions to the HSC, routinely works in partnership with GB counterparts on a range of issues including procurement.

Prescription Charges

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he has any plans to reintroduce prescription charges.

(AQW 1630/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am currently considering a number of different options aimed at ensuring the efficient use of resources and looking at areas including the possible reintroduction of charges for prescriptions. However, I have not made any final decisions on this matter.

Any decision to reintroduce prescription charges will be subject to full public consultation.

Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency: Course Places

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of unfilled Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency course places at the (i) Antrim Area Hospital; and (ii) Causeway Hospital.

(AQW 1645/11-15)

Mr Poots: At 22nd August 2011 there were 19 doctors in training vacancies at Antrim Area and Causeway Hospitals, as follows:-

Antrim - 10 vacancies	1 x Foundation year 2
	2 x Emergency Medicine
	1 x O&G
	1 x Paediatrics
	1 x Core Medical Training
	1 x Gastroenterology
	1 x Rheumatology
	2 x Core Surgical Training
Causeway - 9 vacancies	1 x Foundation year 2
	6 x Emergency medicine
	2 x Core Surgical Training

Vacant Posts

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many vacant posts have been filled or covered by locum doctors in the last 12 months in the (a) Antrim Area Hospital; and (b) Causeway Hospital; and (ii) to detail the associated costs.

(AQW 1646/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Trust has advised that:

(i)

ANTRIM HOSPITAL – AUGUST 2010 – TO FEBRUARY 2011

Specialty	Vacant Post	Grade	No of Locums in Post
Emergency Medicine	1	F2	1
	1	ST1/2	1
	1	ST1/2	1 w.e.f. Feb 11 – Aug 11
Paediatrics	-	-	-
ENT	1	CT1/2	1 w.e.f. Oct 10 – Feb 11
Surgery	1	CT1/2	1 w.e.f. Aug 10 – Feb 11
	1	Middle Grade	1

ANTRIM HOSPITAL - FEBRUARY 11 – TO DATE

Specialty	Vacant Post	Grade	No of Locums in Post
Emergency Medicine			
Paediatrics	1	Staff Grade	1 w.e.f. May 11 – Jun 11
ENT	-	-	-
Surgery	1	CT1/2	1 w.e.f. February 11
	1	F2	1 w.e.f. April 11
	1	CT1/2	1 w.e.f. August 11

CAUSEWAY HOSPITAL: AUGUST 2010 – FEBRUARY 2011

Specialty	Vacant Post	Grade	No of Locums in Post
Emergency Medicine	6	ST1/2	6
Paediatrics	2	ST1/2	2
Surgery	1	CT1/2	1 w.e.f. Aug 10 – Feb 11
	1	Middle Grade	1
Urology	2	Middle Grade	2

CAUSEWAY HOSPITAL: FEBRUARY 2011 – TO DATE

Specialty	Vacant Post	Grade	No of Locums in Post
Emergency Medicine	6	ST1/2	6
Paediatrics	2	ST1/2	2 w.e.f Feb 11 – Aug 11
Surgery	1	Middle Grade	1
	2	CT1/2	2 w.e.f. Aug 11
Urology	2	Middle Grade	2

(ii) Cost of locums for the 12 month period April 2010/March 2011 is as follows:

Causeway Hospital	£2,451,880
Antrim Hospital	£2,415,176
Total cost	£4,867,176

Causeway Hospital: Doctors in Training

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why there has been a difference in the number of doctors in training at the Causeway Hospital compared to other hospitals. (AQW 1648/11-15)

Mr Poots: The difference in the number of doctors in training at any hospital in Northern Ireland, including Causeway, reflects the number of training posts available, which in turn is established through a designation of suitability for training and education purposes. The Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency, working with the Colleges of Medical Education, the General Medical Council and Trusts agree which posts are suitable for training. There will be variances in actual numbers of doctors in training posts each year because of an inability to fill some posts. At 22nd August 2011 there were 74 junior doctor vacancies in Northern Ireland, 9 of which were situated at the Causeway Hospital.

Mental Capacity (Health, Welfare and Finance) Bill

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what transitional arrangements will be put in place for people in the criminal justice system, particularly those under the age of sixteen, when the proposed Mental Capacity (Health Welfare and Finance) Act is made and supersedes the Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. (AQW 1655/11-15)

Mr Poots: In April 2011, the Executive agreed that my Department could proceed to draft the Mental Capacity (Health, Welfare and Finance) Bill which will apply to civil society. The application of the principles and approaches in this Bill to those subject to the criminal justice system is currently being considered by the Department of Justice and will be the subject of a separate Executive paper. My Department is working closely with the Department of Justice to develop the criminal justice proposals and the option remains open to merge the civil and criminal justice elements into one Bill at a later stage. This would be the preferred approach and would obviate the need for any transitional arrangements.

Antrim Area Hospital: Nursing Bank Staff

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many nursing bank staff at the Antrim Area Hospital are waiting to receive holiday pay owed to them from 2008; (ii) whether this non-payment constitutes a breach of their employment contracts; and (iii) when they can expect to receive payment. (AQW 1661/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am advised that all bank staff in the Northern Trust are currently receiving their holiday pay since April 2011. An exercise is under way to identify and pay relevant staff for the period April 2008 to March 2011. The Trust will ensure that all bank staff are paid in accordance with their entitlement under their contract of employment as soon as other payroll priorities permit.

Bowel Cancer Screening Programme

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people aged between 60 and 69 have taken part in the Bowel Cancer Screening Programme since its launch.

(AQW 1682/11-15)

Mr Poots: As of 8 September 2011, 37,203 people aged between 60 and 69 have taken part in the Bowel Cancer Screening Programme since its launch in April 2010.

At-risk Register

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what procedures are followed by social workers when dealing with children placed on the At-risk Register.

(AQW 1705/11-15)

Mr Poots: The procedures for safeguarding children who are at significant risk of harm because of abuse or neglect are set out in the Regional Child Protection Committee's Policy and Procedures Guidance. This guidance also sets out the arrangements for joint working and shared decision making by the professionals and agencies involved.

Ballymena Borough Council Area: Departmental Land

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the land owned by his Department in the Ballymena Borough Council area, including (i) the address; (ii) the size in acres of each site; and (iii) for what each site is used.

(AQW 1740/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Department owns a 1.82 acre site at Dunclug, Cushendall Road, Ballymena. The site is leased to Triangle Housing Association Ltd who propose to build residential accommodation for persons with learning disabilities.

Craigavon Area Hospital: Domestic and Catering Services

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any plans of the Southern Health and Social Care Trust to contract out domestic and catering services at Craigavon Area Hospital.

(AQW 1778/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust (The Trust) has no plans to contract out domestic and catering services. However, the Trust provides laundry services to the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust under a contractual arrangement which will be subject to a competitive tender later this year.

Fire and Rescue Service: Scrap Cars for Training

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the total number of scrap cars the Fire and Rescue Service has used for training purposes in each of the last five years; (ii) where the Fire and Rescue Service procures these cars; and (iii) whether there has been any change in the procurement arrangement over the last five years.

(AQW 1785/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Table below shows the total number of scrap cars used by the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) for training purposes in each of the last five years.

Year	No of Scrap Cars Used for Training Purposes
2006/07	220
2007/08	741
2008/09	820
2009/10	169
2010/11	703
Total	2,653

The NIFRS currently procures scrap cars for training purposes from 15 suppliers across Northern Ireland.

The number of suppliers increased from one during the period 2005 - 2007 to three during 2007 – 2009; and to 15 in 2010.

Fire and Rescue Service: Scrap Cars for Training

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his Department's procurement strategy, with particular reference to obtaining cars for use by the Fire and Rescue Service for training purposes.

(AQW 1786/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) is responsible for the procurement of cars for training purposes. NIFRS procurement is governed by its Procurement Strategy, which has been developed in accordance with the Executive's Public Procurement Policy. In relation to the procurement of scrap cars for training purposes, NIFRS is bound by contract thresholds contained in its procurement strategy and set out in the table below.

Thresholds	Number of Quotations Required
Up to £2,000	May be placed without seeking quotation as per NIFRS procurement policy
£2,000 - £30,000	Four formal written quotations
> £30,000 – EU Thresholds	Publicly advertised tender competition

MRI Scans

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many MRI scans were carried out by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust in (i) 2008; (ii) 2009; and (iii) 2010.

(AQW 1861/11-15)

Mr Poots: The number of MRI scans carried out by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust in (i) 2008; (ii) 2009; and (iii) 2010 is shown in the table below.

	Year		
	2008	2009	2010
No. MRI Scans carried out	4,678	5,278	5,819

Source: Northern HSC Trust

Adoption Strategy

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when their Department is planning to introduce an adoption strategy.

(AQO 349/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department issued a draft strategy, Adopting the Future, for consultation in 2006. In light of the time which has elapsed since the department consulted on a range of options for adoption reform in Northern Ireland, I have asked my officials to revisit the original proposals and the public response to those proposals to ensure that they remain valid and fit for purpose.

Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1418/11-15, when the Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy will be published.

(AQW 1943/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am currently considering the Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy and as yet, no date has been set for its publication. I hope to be in a position to advance this matter shortly.

Department of Justice

Royal Prerogative of Mercy

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many times the Royal Prerogative of Mercy or similar pardons have been granted to serving prisoners in each of the last ten years.

(AQW 1558/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): The Department of Justice has not granted the Royal Prerogative of Mercy since the devolution of policing and justice on 12 April 2010. Previously requests for the Royal Prerogative of Mercy were considered by the Secretary of State.

Marion Price/McGlinchey

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 1509/11-15 (i) to date, what has been done to accommodate to hold Marion Price/McGlinchey as a separated prisoner; (ii) what additional equipment or fittings have been purchased and installed or adapted; (iii) how much this has cost; and (iv) how many prisoners benefit from the installations or adaptations.

(AQW 1560/11-15)

Mr Ford:

- (i) Glen House in Maghaberry Prison has been set aside as a dedicated facility for female prisoners and has been refurbished to provide Ms McGlinchey with a regime and environment which is, as far as possible, consistent with that available to female prisoners in Ash House, Hydebank Wood.
- (ii) The additional equipment or fittings which have been installed or adapted are set out in Table A, below.

TABLE A

Cell

- Flat Screen TV/DVD Combi*
- Computer*
- Curtains/Duvet Set*
- Lamp/Mat/Cushions*

Recreation Room

- Carpet
- Sofa
- Table/Chairs
- Flat ScreenTV/Unit/Digi Box/DVD Player
- Coffee Table
- Book Case
- Uplighter
- 3 x pictures
- 3 x pairs of Curtain
- Mat

Interview Room

- 1 x pair of curtains*
- Carpet*
- 2 x pictures*

Kitchen

- Microwave

Ablutions

- Vanity Unit and Mirror
- Urinals removed and sealed off
- Bath sealed off using sheets of plywood

Stairwell

- 2 x pictures*

Exercise Yard

- Picnic Bench
- Summer Seat
- 2 x Large Planters and flowers
- 2 x Small Planters and flowers
- 14 x Small Plastic Flower Pots and Flowers* provided at no additional cost

(iii) The total cost is for the refurbishment of Glenn house was £2257.00

(iv) Ms McGlinchey is the sole occupant of Glen House and currently the only prisoner to benefit from the refurbishment. The facilities will benefit any other female separated prisoners committed to custody.

Convicted Sex Offender Paul Hunter Redpath

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) how convicted sex offender Paul Hunter Redpath was able to breach his registration requirements; (ii) what restrictions were put in place on his release from custody in January 2010; and (iii) why his absconding was only recently revealed to the public when the last sighting of him was in Scotland on 19 July 2011.

(AQW 1635/11-15)

Mr Ford: Jurisdiction for notification requirements in respect of this individual rests with the police and courts in Scotland, where he has been resident since his release from custody in 2010. I understand that he has been subject to a Sexual Offences Prevention Order since January 2010 with a condition not to leave the Grampian Police area. I also understand that decisions to make a public appeal are taken by the police in Scotland in conjunction with the Procurator Fiscal.

Grampian Police are liaising closely with the PSNI in their attempt to trace Paul Redpath.

Case Number 11/069592

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice for a breakdown of the full costs of case number 11/069592; and why the case was dismissed at Dungannon Magistrates' Court.

(AQW 1637/11-15)

Mr Ford: Some of the costs associated with case number 11/069592 are not yet known and not all agencies hold cost information at case level.

The table below therefore sets out the estimated costs associated with this case.

ESTIMATED COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH CASE NUMBER 11/069592

Cost Type	Estimated Cost
PSNI Prosecution ¹	Not Known
PPS Prosecution ²	£300
Defence (Legal Aid Costs) ³	£1,140
Court (Judiciary and Staff Costs)	£233
Facilities (e.g. Courtroom Accommodation)	£85
Total	£1,758

1. As this case did not go to trial there were no court related costs for police. PSNI cannot disaggregate out the entire costs of the officers attending calls and the investigation of individual cases without incurring disproportionate cost.
2. PPS advise that it is not possible to produce precise costings for particular cases since the amount of time required to take individual decisions as to prosecution will vary depending on a range of factors including the complexity of the case and the extent of the case papers. Some costs are identifiable, for example, the fees paid to prosecuting counsel, however in relation to this case the PPS used its own in-house prosecutors so no costs of this type were incurred. Whilst it is not possible to give a precise overall figure of PPS costs from the outset to the conclusion of this particular case, it can be said that this figure ought not to exceed £300.00.
3. Legal aid in this case was provided for both solicitor and counsel. NILSC have not yet received any claims for this case and have therefore provided estimated costs (based on the Magistrates' Courts and County Court Appeals (Criminal Legal Aid) (Costs) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2009). These costs exclude VAT and any potential claim for travel and mileage.

The court made an order to Strike Out the case and noted 'No Jurisdiction'. The reasons underpinning this decision are entirely a matter for the District Judge (Magistrates' Court) who presided in this case.

Marek Barcin Case

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice what is the total legal aid cost to date of the Marek Barcin case.

(AQW 1638/11-15)

Mr Ford: No bills have been submitted so far. The case involves an application for extradition which falls outside the normal standard fee regime and for this reason it is not possible to provide an estimate of the likely cost.

Woburn House, Millisle

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice whether there are any plans to house category C prisoners in Woburn House, Millisle.

(AQW 1684/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service is exploring a number of options in relation to contingency accommodation as a direct result of the increasing prisoner population. There are no plans to house prisoners in Woburn House, Millisle.

Children Who Commit a Criminal Offence

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice what action can be taken against the parents or guardians of children who are ten years old or younger who commit a criminal offence which the parents or guardians are found to have actively encouraged; and to detail the number of (i) prosecutions; and (ii) convictions secured against parents or guardians in these circumstances in each of the last three years, broken down by court division.

(AQW 1696/11-15)

Mr Ford: Children of 10 years of age are currently within the age of criminal responsibility and can be prosecuted in their own right. Children under the age of 10 are below the age of criminal responsibility and cannot be arrested or prosecuted. They can however commit offences which can be recorded by police. If a parent or guardian were found to have intentionally encouraged or assisted such an offence, or encouraged or assisted such an offence believing it would be committed, they could be prosecuted for encouraging or assisting crime. Data which would identify any such prosecutions are not available.

Provisions exist in law for Parental Compensation Orders whereby parents/guardians can be required to pay compensation to a person affected by the taking of property or its loss or damage caused by a child under 10 in the course of anti-social behaviour or committing an act which would have constituted an offence if the child had been 10 or over. For a range of reasons these powers have not been commenced for Northern Ireland and will need to be considered more widely in the context of the Youth Justice Review the report on which I will be publishing shortly.

Convictions for the Possession of Illegal Fireworks

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many people in each court division have been convicted for the possession of illegal fireworks in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1789/11-15)

Mr Ford: The table below gives the number convicted for the possession of prohibited fireworks by court division, under Regulations 4(2) & 13 Explosives (Fireworks) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002.

Data are collated on the principal offence rule; only the most serious offence for which an offender is convicted is included. The table covers the calendar years 2002 to 2006, the latest year for which figures are currently available. This was due to changes in how such data are collected but steps are now being taken as a matter of urgency to derive data for subsequent years. It is hoped information for the period 2007 to mid 2009 will be available in the near future; work on data for 2010 is also progressing in parallel.

NUMBER CONVICTED FOR POSSESSION OF PROHIBITED FIREWORKS 2004-2006

Year	Number convicted
2004	
Fermanagh & Tyrone	1
Ards	1
Total	2
2005	
Armagh	1
East Tyrone	2
Total	3
2006	
Londonderry	1
Total	1

Multi-agency Risk Assessment Conferences

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the proposed Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences operational group.

(AQW 1796/11-15)

Mr Ford: A Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) Operational Group has now been established and the inaugural meeting of the Group has been scheduled for 26 September 2011.

Convictions for Selling Fireworks Without a Licence

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many people have been convicted for selling fireworks without a licence in each of the last three years, broken down by court division.

(AQW 1826/11-15)

Mr Ford: The table below gives the number convicted for selling fireworks without a license under Regulation 4(1) and 12 of the Explosives (Fireworks) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997 in each of the last available three years by court division.

Data are collated on the principal offence rule; only the most serious offence for which an offender is convicted is included. The table covers the calendar years 2004 to 2006, the latest year for which figures are currently available.

NUMBER OF PEOPLE CONVICTED OF SELLING FIREWORKS WITHOUT A LICENSE BY COURT DIVISION – NUMBER CONVICTED, 2004-2006

Year	Number convicted
2004	
Belfast	4
Fermanagh & Tyrone	1
Ards	2
Total	7
2005	
Belfast	2
Antrim	1
Fermanagh & Tyrone	2
Londonderry	1
Total	6
2006	
Belfast	3
Antrim	3
Craigavon	1
Fermanagh & Tyrone	2
Total	9

Department for Regional Development

Rail Link North of Ballymena to Londonderry

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the budget commitments required to develop the rail link north of Ballymena to Londonderry; and what assurance he can give that this work will begin in 2014.

(AQW 1597/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): The current estimated cost of the Coleraine to Londonderry track relay is £75m.

As part of the Budget 2010 process, it was decided by my predecessor to defer the start of the Coleraine to Londonderry track relay project until 2014 and funding of £20m was allocated to allow the project to proceed at that time. The rest of the funding will have to be found in the next budget allocations and I will be seeking support to ensure that the necessary funding is secured.

I would like to emphasise that I am committed to upgrading, not simply maintaining, the Londonderry line as quickly as possible. I will continue to review options and discussions will continue about what is technically and financially feasible.

NI Railways: Rolling Stock

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development how much rolling stock NI Railways intends to purchase in the next two years; and to outline the timetable and routes on which this stock will become operational.

(AQW 1601/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department is providing funding in total of £114m to enable Translink to purchase 20 Class 4000 trains.

The first 5 units have been delivered to Northern Ireland and are undergoing extensive commissioning and testing. Subject to the successful completion of this process Translink expect the first unit to enter passenger service during autumn 2011 with all units in passenger service by mid-2012.

When available, Translink plans to substitute the existing old trains (Class 450 units) in service on the Larne line with new Class 4000 units on a one for one basis until all services on the Larne line are operated with modern trains. In the short term the existing Larne line timetable will be retained.

The rest of the new trains will be deployed across the rest of the railways network to increase service levels and capacity.

A new revised timetable to be implemented across the network is still in draft and continues to be subject to test and validation followed by a period of consultation.

Buses Privately Hired from Translink

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of buses privately hired from Translink for use on 12 July 2011 which were not fitted with seatbelts; and whether any of these buses were hired with subsidies.

(AQW 1602/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: There were 333 buses privately hired from Translink for use on the 12 July 2011. Of these 105 did not have seatbelts fitted. Private hire charges made by Translink are expected to be on a commercial basis.

Rail Infrastructure: Funding

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Regional Development how much funding has been drawn down from (i) the European Cohesion Fund Ten-T programme for rail infrastructure; and (ii) the European Regional Development Fund, in each of the past five years.

(AQW 1610/11-15)

Mr Kennedy:

- (i) The table below details the receipts received from the European Cohesion Fund Ten-T programme for rail infrastructure in each of the past five years.

	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Ten-T	£0	£0	£1,110,677.50	£677,897.50	£367,707.89

- (ii) The following table provides details on the draw downs received from the European Regional Development Fund for rail in each of the past five years:

	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Building Sustainable Prosperity Programme	£2,632,505.68	£837,315.23	£0	£0	£2,185,912.61

Weed Spraying: North Down

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Regional Development why the spraying to control weeds on footpaths and roadways in North Down has not yet taken place in this financial year, resulting in unsightly footpaths and increased risk to users; and to outline any plans to address this issue.

(AQW 1658/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the one year contract for grass cutting and weed control for the North Down area was not extended to the 2011 season on the basis that it was considered not to be providing adequate value for money.

Roads Service, taking into account the lead-in time for developing and awarding such contracts of between 8 - 12 months, found it necessary to revert this work back in-house, to be carried out by its internal contractor, Roads Service Direct.

Regrettably, due to the relatively short lead in times involved and the need to provide appropriate training to the workforce, weed spraying was not completed as planned in some areas, despite Roads Service's best efforts to keep ahead of demand. Roads Service has advised that staff training is now complete, new equipment is available and that every effort is being undertaken to ensure that outstanding work is completed as quickly as possible.

However, Roads Service acknowledges that it is late in the season for weed spraying and that some areas will require additional effort to remove large and unsightly weeds. This work is being prioritised and it is hoped that results of these efforts will be quickly evident.

Delivery of Winter Services

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department has developed a contingency plan for the delivery of winter services.

(AQW 1662/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Both my Department's Roads Service and NI Water have dedicated winter service response plans.

These are complemented by the Department's overarching Major Emergency Response Plan and Business Continuity Plan. This suite of plans enables the Department to respond to major emergency situations, or disruptions to normal services, both in relation to its functions and in the wider community.

The Department's Business Continuity Plan was reviewed and updated in March 2011. The Major Emergency Response Plan is in the final stages of a review to take account of issues raised in the Freeze / Thaw incident. It is planned to test the revised plan later this year.

Belfast Rapid Transit System

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Regional Development when commuters within the Strangford constituency who are travelling to Belfast can expect to use the Rapid Transit System.

(AQO 253/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department is currently preparing an Outline Business Case for the Belfast Rapid Transit project which is due for completion in April 2012. This will identify the preferred options for a bus-based Belfast Rapid Transit in terms of the network routes, procurement strategy, commercial/business model and fare system. As part of this Outline Business Case process, a 12 week public consultation exercise will commence in October 2011. In the initial weeks of the consultation period public exhibitions will be held in East Belfast, West Belfast and the city centre. This will give everyone the opportunity to view the proposals, ask questions and make comments which will assist my Department in the planning of the system.

Following the completion of the Outline Business Case, DFP and Executive Committee approval to proceed will be sought. Funding for the planning and commencement of initial implementation measures for Belfast Rapid Transit is included in the 2011/12 – 2014/15 budget.

The proposals for Belfast Rapid Transit include the provision of Park and Ride sites at key locations in the East and West of the city. One of the proposed locations, in Dundonald, will complement the use of the rapid transit system by those commuting from the Strangford constituency.

The target date for the operation of the Belfast Rapid Transit system is 2017. This is of course dependant on the availability of funding in the next budgetary period. At the appropriate time my Department will bid for the resources required.

Roads: Holywood Arches

Mr Douglas asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to remove the road protection line at the junction of Holywood Road/Holywood Arches in Belfast to encourage private sector investment and wider regeneration.

(AQO 256/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: During a recent meeting with local representatives to discuss the Connswater Greenway Project, I was made aware of concerns regarding the potential impact of the Holywood Arches Bypass and Connsbank Link protection lines on potential regeneration opportunities in the area.

The Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) identified the the Holywood Arches Bypass and Connsbank Link as works to be provided by private developers seeking improved linkages to Titanic Quarter. Protection lines were included in the Belfast Urban Area Plan (BUAP) and draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP).

It is now unlikely that the funding source originally envisaged for this scheme remains in place and in the current economic climate, the scheme is regarded as a low priority for my Department.

Roads Service is currently awaiting the outcome of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) Inquiry, which will review the need to retain protection lines for this future road scheme.

The Department of the Environment's Planning Service is leading on this issue and I am advised that the date of adoption of the Plan is dependent upon receipt of the Planning Appeals Commission Report and is unlikely to be before the end of 2012.

Whilst I fully appreciate the concerns that Mr. Douglas and the local community have in relation to the uncertainty over the road scheme, it would be inappropriate at this time to interfere with due process. Therefore, I will await the outcome of the Inquiry before considering the way forward.

Roads: Gritting

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister for Regional Development what measures are in place to ensure that all neighbourhoods have sufficient gritting facilities in place for the coming winter.

(AQO 257/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that prior to the start of each winter service season, it carries out a significant amount of pre-planning to ensure a state of readiness for the coming winter. As well as a number of routine pre-season checks, this planning includes ensuring that adequate staffing arrangements are in place, including training for new staff, where required. Roads Service also ensures that all its winter service equipment is in working order and there is an adequate supply of salt. It also has arrangements in place to supplement stocks of salt during the winter period, if necessary.

While Roads Service targets the limited resources available for this service on the busier main through routes, salt bins or grit piles may be provided for use by the public, on a self help basis, on other routes adopted or maintained by Roads Service, which do not qualify for inclusion onto the gritting schedule.

Roads Service currently provides over four thousand [approximately 4,200] salt bins and nearly forty thousand [39,500] grit piles on public roads.

Roads Service commits significant resources to its winter service programme and every night, from the end of October until the middle of next April, Roads Service will have over 300 people on standby ready to salt main roads, helping drivers across Northern Ireland to cope with the wintry conditions.

I have also asked Roads Service to work with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), to develop a broad framework of principles which will set out the basis of partnering arrangements between Roads Service and Councils for the removal of snow and ice from busy town centre footways, during prolonged periods of wintry weather. When finalised, it is hoped that agreements based on the broad framework can be put in place, specifically tailored for each individual council. I would hope that such arrangements could be agreed before the winter season starts, however, each individual Council will have the final decision on whether or not it signs up to provide this service to the public.

Sewerage: Newcastle

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the sewerage infrastructure upgrade for Newcastle.

(AQO 258/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am aware of the expressions of concern from the Member and a number of Public Representatives about the condition of the existing sewerage infrastructure within Newcastle and am therefore pleased to reaffirm the commitment of Northern Ireland Water to addressing the situation.

I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that to date the sewerage infrastructure serving Newcastle has undergone an extensive upgrade. The work has been undertaken to improve the system and to reduce the environmental impact caused by spills from a number of Combined Storm Overflows. It is envisaged that the work will be largely completed by the end of 2011. The current estimated cost of the work is in the region of five and a half million.

Northern Ireland Water has also identified the need for improvements at the existing wastewater treatment works in order to ensure that increasing environmental consent standards for discharges are met. This upgrading work will cost between £7 and £9 million. Northern Ireland Water is currently evaluating tenders for the work and it is expected that the contract will be awarded in November 2011. This should enable work to commence on site shortly afterwards with a completion date of July 2013.

A2 Road Scheme

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Regional Development if he would attend a full meeting of Carrickfergus Borough Council to discuss the A2 road upgrade.

(AQO 259/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Member will be aware that the upgrade of the A2 in East Antrim was the subject of an Adjournment Debate held in the Assembly Chamber on 31 May 2011, when I made a statement outlining my Department's position on the scheme. A Hansard record of the Adjournment Debate is available to view on the Northern Ireland Assembly website.

The Member will also be aware that I met a delegation from the Council, which included him, on 17 August 2011, to discuss this scheme.

As the position regarding the Scheme has not changed in the interim, I feel that a further meeting would not be beneficial at this stage, but I will keep the situation under review.

Railways: Bangor

Mr Cree asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the customer satisfaction levels for the Bangor railway line.

(AQO 260/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Customer satisfaction for Northern Ireland Railways is measured through an independent survey that is conducted twice every year. The survey has been developed in conjunction with the Consumer Council, Translink and my own Department.

The latest published results for Autumn 2010 show that customer satisfaction on the Bangor railway line was 81%. This is equivalent to the overall customer satisfaction score for Northern Ireland Railways.

Results for Spring 2011 for the passenger's charter survey are due to be published shortly. Early indications suggest that overall customer satisfaction has improved and that customers on the Bangor line are the most satisfied customers. These provisional results combined with the record numbers of passenger journeys on Northern Ireland Railways in 2010/11 lead me to conclude that this is a very commendable performance by Northern Ireland Railways.

Railways: Belfast to Londonderry

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans for ensuring that the operation and development of the Belfast to Londonderry rail line, particularly north of Coleraine, proceeds as planned.

(AQO 262/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am committed to upgrading, not simply maintaining, the Londonderry line as quickly as possible within available resources.

Prior to the budget Translink had planned to start this major £75 million project in 2012. However, as a result of the budget and to avoid disruption to Londonderry's UK City of Culture Year in 2013, it is currently intended that the start will be deferred until 2014. There has been funding of £20 million allocated to the 2014/15 budget to allow the project to start at that time.

The Member may be aware of an answer provided to Mr George Robinson MLA in February this year, by my predecessor, (AQW 4595/11) which made it clear that the track relay project was planned to start in 2014. This was raised as part of the consultation on the budget but the position remained unchanged at the end of that process.

My Department is providing £7 million in funding so that Translink can plan and implement a programme of engineering work to maintain safety on the line and keep the line operational. Translink hope to introduce a fully enhanced service when the full re-lay is completed. A key factor in all this is to safeguard passenger and staff safety.

In light of the concerns raised with me about current plans I initiated discussion with key stakeholders in the North West region. Specifically, I have recently met with Derry City Council and other public representatives and bodies. I have also raised these matters with my Executive colleagues and separately with the DFP Minister. I will continue to review options and discussions will continue about what is financially and technically feasible.

I am looking forward to debating this matter further in the Private Members' Motion later this afternoon.

DRD: Terrorist Commemorations

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he has taken, and intends to take, to ensure the removal of terrorist commemorations from his Department's property and that of its arm's-length bodies.

(AQO 263/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would, from the outset, state that I share the views of the Member in that I find these memorials to terrorists offensive. I can also assure Members that my Department does not approve of, or support the unauthorised use of Departmental property for illegally erected roadside memorials.

Memorials erected without lawful authority have much in common with other unauthorised activities, such as, kerb and lamppost painting, and have the potential to create tension within local communities as well as posing a risk to those tasked with their removal. Roads Service will take action where there are road safety implications and continue to work with other agencies and local representatives to remove the offending material, where there is widespread local support.

Unauthorised memorials on the property of the Department's arms-length bodies are matters for the Boards of those organisations, bearing in mind their responsibilities for safety and statutory obligations to promote good relations between people of different religious beliefs or political persuasions.

Department for Social Development

Housing Executive Properties: East Antrim

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Social Development how many houses owned by the Housing Executive in the East Antrim area are currently unoccupied.

(AQW 1580/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): The Housing Executive has advised that there are currently 201 unoccupied dwellings in the East Antrim area, which covers their Carrickfergus and Larne District Offices.

Rural Housing Enabler Service

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development whether funding is being sought to provide a rural housing enabler service.

(AQW 1584/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that it has no immediate plans to seek funding for a rural housing enabler service but this will be kept under review. The Housing Executive has had discussions with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and a number of District Council Clusters (Local Action Groups) to see if there was a possibility of joint working on this initiative through the Rural Development Programme, but in the current financial climate was unable to identify any funding sources.

3G Football Pitch: Kilcooley Estate, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on plans for a 3G football pitch for the Kilcooley Estate, Bangor.

(AQW 1585/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The proposed 3G football pitch for the Kilcooley Estate is being advanced by the Kilcooley Sports Forum. An assessment of the proposal completed in September 2010 recommended a project with an estimated cost of £1.4 million. The Sports Forum will now consult with local residents to ascertain their views on the project and, subject to the outcome of this, will seek sources of funding for it.

Neighbourhood Renewal: Kilcooley Estate, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what Neighbourhood Renewal actions have yet to be implemented in the Kilcooley Estate, Bangor.

(AQW 1587/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Neighbourhood Renewal actions are implemented on the basis of the Kilcooley Neighbourhood Partnership's Action Plan which sets out its priorities for the next 4 years. The projects identified for funding, or part funding, through the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund over the period are as follows:

Approved Projects				
	Estimated Expenditure 2011/12	Estimated Expenditure 2012/13	Estimated Expenditure 2013/14	Estimated Expenditure 2014/15
Kilcooley Community Forum Running Costs	£48,786.11	£50,030.95	£0.00	£0.00
Kilcooley P.S. Nurturing Project	£70,000.00	£70,000.00	£70,000.00	£70,000.00
Kilcooley Women's Centre STEP Project	£44,289.32	£45,100.32	£45,939.66	£46,808.24
Neighbourhood Partnership - Technical Assistance	£19,580.70	£19,130.70	£19,130.70	£19,130.70
Bangor Alternatives	£37,077.76	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00
Proposed Future Projects				
Kilcooley Allotments		£50,000.00		
Young Men's Education		£30,000.00	£30,000.00	£30,000.00
Early Years Project	£20,000.00	£60,000.00	£60,000.00	£60,000.00
Bangor Alternatives		£38,000	£38,000	£38,000
Kilcooley Community Forum Running Costs		£0.00	£50,000	£50,000
Multi-Functional Centre - Appraisal	£10,000.00			
Multi-Functional Centre - Construction	Costs to be determined			
3G Sports Facility	Costs to be determined			

Benefit Fraud

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the proposed timetable for the initiative to tackle benefit fraud.

(AQW 1590/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Social Security Agency has a robust strategy in place to detect and investigate fraud, with losses through fraud down from over £60m in 2001/02 to £20.5m in 2010. I am keen to build on the success to date and explore fully any new opportunities for further reducing the levels of fraud within the welfare system.

A joint Department of Work and Pensions and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs strategy, setting out a range of new initiatives to tackle fraud and error, was published on 18th October 2010. Many of the new initiatives proposed in the joint strategy would be helpful and relevant in tackling fraud and error in the Northern Ireland social security system, with replication also necessary in some instances to maintain operational capability.

The Agency has therefore set up a Project Team to bring forward proposals for implementation, where appropriate, of similar measures in Northern Ireland. Subject to the timescales necessary for legislation, procurement and structural change, it is anticipated that implementation of any agreed new initiatives could take place by 2012/13.

Pensioners' Bungalows: Bloomfield Estate, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the pensioners' bungalows in Bloomfield Estate, Bangor.

(AQW 1689/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Economic Appraisal for Bloomfield Bungalows is to be presented to the Housing Executive Board on 28 September. It will then be sent to the Department for consideration.

I will be happy to meet with the member and discuss the options presented at that time.

Children Living Below the Poverty Line: East Antrim

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Social Development how many children in the East Antrim area are living below the poverty line.

(AQW 1728/11-15)

Mr McCausland: During the period 2005/09, 5,600 children in East Antrim Westminster Parliamentary Constituency were living below the relative poverty line. This equates to 29% of children in East Antrim Westminster Parliamentary Constituency. The results are produced using the Family Resources Survey datasets for Northern Ireland, and the Households Below Average Income datasets for Northern Ireland.

Boiler Replacement Scheme

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the reasoning behind the criteria for qualification for the Boiler Replacement Scheme.

(AQW 1811/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The rationale for the pilot Boiler Replacement Scheme was to offer assistance to older householders on low income who missed out on other energy efficiency improvement Government schemes such as the Warm Homes Scheme. All potential Boiler Replacement Scheme beneficiaries have been identified and have been contacted by leaflet. A budget of £2 million has been set aside to fund 1,330 boiler replacement installations.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 23 September 2011

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Social Investment Fund

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) how much has been spent to date under the Social Investment Fund; and (ii) how much is estimated to be spent in the remainder of the current financial year.

(AQW 1611/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr O'Dowd (The First Minister and the Acting deputy First Minister): The policy is currently being developed and is at an advanced stage. Therefore the spend part of the process has not yet commenced.

We have given the commitment that the fund will remain an £80 million fund. Therefore any monies not processed this year will be re-profiled across years 2, 3 and 4.

Childcare Strategy

Ms Lo asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what measures have been put in place to utilise the first £3 million funding of the £12 million funding that has been ring-fenced to progress the draft Childcare Strategy.

(AQW 1736/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr O'Dowd: We are working closely with Departments and with stakeholders, through the Ministerial led Poverty and Social Inclusion Stakeholder Forum, to seek to maximise uptake of the new additional monies ring-fenced for Childcare.

Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland: North Antrim

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the current investment commitments under the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland broken down by constituency; and for their assessment of the investment in North Antrim.

(AQW 1754/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr O'Dowd: Information on the progress of projects in the Investment Strategy is made available to MLAs on a monthly basis for their constituencies, and is also published on a website that provides details for all the constituencies at:

http://www.isni.gov.uk/projects_ctl.aspx.

The North Antrim constituency is benefiting from new investment in roads, transport, social housing, schools, water and waste management through projects that are completed or currently underway.

Budget Review Group

Mr F McCann asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work of the Budget Review Group.

(AQO 312/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr O'Dowd: The Ministerial Budget Review Group is continuing its work during this Assembly term. The Group's work includes exploring additional potential revenue raising options and taking forward the Review of Arm's Length Bodies so that recommendations can be made to the Executive.

The last Budget Review Group meeting took place on 15 June 2011 and, following further development of the work over the summer period, it is expected that the Group will be convened again in early autumn.

Head of the Civil Service

Dr McDonnell asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the process and timeframe for the appointment of the successor to the Head of the Civil Service; and whether the process is seeking candidates both internally and externally.

(AQO 346/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr O'Dowd: Following confirmation by Sir Bruce Robinson that he is to retire, the appointment process for the new Head of the Civil Service is underway.

The present process is by an internal competition. The successful candidate will be Secretary to the Executive, Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service and Permanent Secretary for OFMDFM.

The particular skills set required for this challenging position necessitate, or at least provide a presumption in favour of, a thorough understanding and direct experience of working at a senior level within the devolved administration.

In both London and Dublin this appointment is also an internal process.

Applications were invited by 26 August from suitably qualified candidates within the Northern Ireland Civil Service who possess the relevant skills and experience. Clearly if this approach did not provide a satisfactory outcome we would reconsider.

Applicants have been interviewed by an external recruitment panel with considerable experience of recruiting to the highest level of the Civil Service and the wider public and private sectors.

The final stage will be for us to consider the panel's recommendations on suitable candidates.

It is hoped that this process will be completed shortly.

We believe that a similar approach should be repeated for some other appointments to the Senior Civil Service in the future and we will bring a paper to our Executive colleagues on this subject.

Maze/Long Kesh: Peace-building and Conflict Resolution Centre

Mr B McCrea asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the funding application to the Special EU Programmes Body for the Peace Building and Conflict Resolution Centre at the Maze/Long Kesh site.

(AQO 350/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr O'Dowd: The Peace Building and Conflict Resolution Centre funding application is currently with the Special European Union Programmes Body. We understand that a decision may be expected in November.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Village Renewal Funding

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what support is available under Village Renewal Funding to assist villages to produce their 5 year village plans; and what steps she proposes to take to ensure that Departments and sub-regional bodies work cross-sectorally to ensure that there is a coherent strategy for rural development.

(AQW 1771/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Under Measure 3.5 'Village renewal' of Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013, a budget of £12 million has been made available to the seven Joint Council Committees (JCCs) implementing the Axis on the Departments behalf. The main purpose of the measure is to enable and encourage residents of villages and surrounding areas to create a vision and an integrated action plan to ensure the full potential of such areas is achieved and to support integrated village initiatives. The action plans should include an analysis of what needs to be done and reference to possible sources that could implement these including government departments, local authorities or other statutory bodies.

The identification of villages that will receive Axis 3 assistance is a decision for the individual cluster to take. DARD has provided detailed guidance to all clusters on the Village Renewal process to be adopted via Axis 3.

In addition to this guidance, the Rural Network for NI (RNNI) has set up a thematic group involving representatives of all seven council clusters.

Cluster representatives been involved in undertaking study visits and in the drafting of additional guidance via this thematic group.

Village Renewal Funding

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how she will ensure that rural community groups maximise the opportunities presented by Village Renewal Funding so that no monies are unallocated and returned to the EU Commission.

(AQW 1772/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Under Measure 3.5 'Village renewal' of Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013, a budget of £12 million has been made available to the seven Joint Council Committees (JCCs) implementing the Axis on the Departments behalf. DARD has provided detailed guidance to all clusters on the Village Renewal process to be adopted via Axis 3. Also through the NI Rural Network a thematic group has been established made up of Local Action Group (LAG) members from across the seven LAG areas. This group has been involved in several study visits and produced a booklet highlighting the village renewal process.

The programme is delivered using the LEADER approach which is a grassroots 'bottom up' system which will ensure that rural community groups are aware of and avail of the opportunities that exist within Measure 3.5. Additionally, funding has been provided through the Rural Development Programme to employ the services of a Village Renewal Facilitator to work on the ground and provide assistance where required.

The Village Renewal Measure is open to all rural groups representing villages in the north, regardless of size and capacity. It is hoped that newly formed and smaller groups will choose to avail of the services of the Facilitator.

Rural Development Programme

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is the maximum number of audits carried out by her Department and external bodies, up to and including European Level, that any

one project which is part of the current Rural Development Program may be subject to; and whether there is a minimum project value to which any of these audits would not be applicable.

(AQW 1817/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The EU has introduced a number of audit and verification control checks to ensure that expenditure by Member States is in compliance with EU Regulation 65/2011. The number and type of audit checks applied will be dependent on the Rural Development Measure to which an applicant has successfully applied and submitted a claim.

Whilst it would be unlikely, it is the case that any one project submitting claims under the Rural Development Programme (RDP) could potentially be subjected to up to 6 Audits and Verification Checks in any one financial year. The assumption for this is:

- (i) For all successful grant applications to the RDP, DARD's Internal Audit Unit, NIAO and The Commission Auditors have the authority to carry out an audit in accordance with their audit strategies. An examination of DARD's procedures could result in audit visits to grant recipients.
- (ii) All successful applications to the RDP will be subjected to an administration check as required by Articles 11 and 24 of EC Reg 65/2011. In respect of Axes 1 & 3 of the RDP, DARD staff carry out a re-performance check on a sample of claims.
- (iii) Beneficiaries may also be subject to on the spot checks in accordance with Articles 12 and 25 of the Regulation. These checks must cover at least 5% of all beneficiaries applying to animal and area based schemes for each claim period and at least 5% of the expenditure of other schemes.
- (iv) Investment projects under Axis 1 and 3 (including Leader) may also be subject to ex post checks in accordance with Article 29. This check must cover at least 1% of EAFRD expenditure.

I would re-iterate that that all applicants will be not be subjected to all these checks but they will be subjected to at least one administration check.

There is no minimum project value to which any of these audits would be applicable.

Rural Development Programme

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what risks her Department has identified in each Joint Council Committee or Local Area Group in the Rural Development Programme that necessitate a level of audit of 50 percent and above.

(AQW 1835/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The audit to which the member refers is the re-performance checks undertaken by my Department's Rural Development Programme Compliance Unit (PCU) in respect of project administration checks performed by Joint Council Committees (JCCs) under Article 24 of Community Regulations 65/2011. These re-performance checks provide two key functions. First and foremost, they act as a support mechanism where, through the re-performance process, PCU and local Rural Development Division officials provide JCC staff with ongoing advice and guidance to enable them to address issues arising from administration, management and approval of individual projects under Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme. Such issues will include applicant reliability, eligibility of project for funding, public procurement requirements and so on.

The second function of re-performance checks is to provide the Department, as the Paying Agency for EU funds and custodian of National monies, with assurances that JCC's and LAGs are compliant with agreed operating rules and that they continue to make good progress in administering and managing Axis 3 projects at a local level. This ongoing assessment evaluates a number of potential risk factors, which apply to all JCCs/LAGs, and include:

- The volume of payments processed by the JCC within each of the Axis 3 measures.
- The ability to test payments processed by individual JCCs in each of the measures
- The number of projects which have been assessed by the JCC as high, medium or low risk.

- The number of findings / recommendations from various audits, including NIAO, DARD Internal Audit and DARD re-performance checks.
- Implementation of previous audit findings / recommendations.
- Ineligible expenditure identified by the various audit inspections.

I am pleased that performance to date by JCCs has enabled my Department to reduce re-performance checks on all JCCs by 50% and am confident that this will reduce further as and when JCCs have encountered and processed reasonable levels of projects from all the Axis 3 funding measures. The overall aim of my Department, working closely with JCCs and LAGs, is to ensure that Axis 3 of the RDP provides a fair, equitable and accountable funding process and where all projects approved meet the test of eligibility, public procurement requirements, value for money and other terms and conditions under EU and National funding regulations and rules. Failure to do so can lead to expenditure disqualification and even penalty fines, which my Department and JCCs/LAGs are equally determined to prevent.

Common Agricultural Policy: Reform

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail any meetings she has had with Northern Ireland's MPs in relation to the forthcoming negotiations on the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy.

(AQW 1845/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I have discussed the forthcoming reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) with Pat Doherty MP MLA in his role as Assembly Private Secretary. However, I have not received requests from other local MPs for meetings on this issue. I would, of course, welcome any such requests and would be more than willing to meet with our MPs given the importance of CAP reform to the local agricultural industry.

Student Fee Freeze

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what alterations she has made to her departmental budget to accommodate the freeze in student fees.

(AQW 1938/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Budget reductions are required from 2012-13 onwards, therefore my department has not made any alterations to its 2011-12 budget to accommodate the freeze in student fees.

I have not yet made a decision on how my department will accommodate our budget reductions from 2012-13 to 2014-15.

Veterinary Degree Courses in Northern Ireland

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with the relevant bodies regarding the provision of veterinary degree courses in Northern Ireland; and what veterinary courses are currently available.

(AQW 1940/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I recently met with the North of Ireland Veterinary Association and the British Veterinary Association. During this meeting, we discussed their concerns about the effects of university fees on veterinary students from the north of Ireland but did not discuss the provision of a veterinary degree course here.

A veterinary public health post-graduate course is available at the University of Ulster in conjunction with University College Dublin, and CAFRE provides part time courses in veterinary nursing at Further Education level. Veterinary science degree courses are available at seven universities in Britain and in University College Dublin. There are also a number of veterinary degree courses available in other EU Member States.

Rural Development Programme

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the set up costs; and (ii) maintenance costs to date for her Department's Rural Development Programme database.

(AQW 1960/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The database to which the Member refers is a multi-Departmental system procured by DFP. To date, set up costs associated with my Department's Rural Development Programme amount to £304,238 and associated maintenance costs total £111,534.

Angling Trust: Legal Challenge to the Water Framework Directive

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she is aware of the Angling Trust's legal challenge to the Water Framework Directive; and what action she is taking to protect the fishing industry in the event of the challenge succeeding.

(AQW 1999/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am aware that the Angling Trust and WWF UK halted a Judicial Review of the English Environment Agency's River Basin Management Plans for improving water quality under the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD). DOE have lead responsibility for the implementation of the WFD here. My Department works with DOE to meet the requirements of the WFD which are outlined in their River Basin Management Plans. This is done through the WFD Interdepartmental Working Group and bilateral meetings with the NIEA and engagement with stakeholders through the WFD Stakeholder Forum and Catchment Stakeholder Groups. I am not aware of any similar challenge to River Basin Management Plans here.

Forest Service: Business Plan 2011/12

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why the Forest Service's Business Plan 2011/12 includes a target to extend the area of woodland cover by 200 hectares when this is lower than the figure that was achieved in 2010/11, given that if it was met it would take 400 years to double woodland cover rather than the 50 years committed to by the Executive in 2006.

(AQW 2017/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Forest Service Business Plan target to create 200 hectares of woodland under the Woodland Grant Scheme in 2011/12 is a realistic and achievable target. It reflects the recent uptake of woodland creation grants by landowners and is affordable given capital budgetary constraints. The Business Plan also identifies an associated target to develop proposals for new mechanisms to support woodland creation, in recognition that higher levels of planting will be required in future to achieve our long term aim.

The long-term aim, expressed in the Forestry Strategy (2006), seeks to increase woodland cover from 6% to 12% of land area over the next 50 years. The Strategy acknowledges, however, the strong tradition and desire that farmers have towards farming. This means that woodland expansion is likely to be slow in the early years of the 50 year period.

The Business Plan also includes a target to complete a report on woodland area and type in the north of Ireland and publish preliminary results. This will provide a more comprehensive assessment of the baseline woodland cover and type and help inform us about future woodland creation targets. In addition, I will be reviewing the effectiveness of the Strategy and the associated targets contained in the Business Plan.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Fish Stocks

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the impact on fish stocks arising from poaching in inland waterways.

(AQW 1674/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Poaching is an illegal fishing activity and DCAL is concerned with any illegal fishing activity taking place throughout its operational area.

There is a wide range of complex factors that affect fish stocks and without specific information on the numbers of fish being taken by poachers it is difficult to give any meaningful assessment of the impact of poaching.

However, the loss of any adult fish has the immediate effect of reducing the numbers available for anglers and in the longer term reduces the potential breeding stock in that water.

Windsor Park: Refurbishment

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she intends to ensure that a social inclusion clause that will reflect the high levels of unemployment in the surrounding community is incorporated into the building contract for the planned refurbishment of Windsor Park.

(AQW 1729/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can confirm that it is our intention that the governing body of association football will incorporate social inclusion clauses within the building contracts for the Windsor Park project. This will also apply to the governing bodies of rugby and Gaelic games. The content of the social clauses for inclusion in Construction Contracts have been devised by a Construction Industry Forum Sustainability Task Group. Central Procurement Directorate and the Department for Employment and Learning are currently in a series of discussions to agree standard social clauses for inclusion in all future public procurement contracts.

It is the intention to include social clause requirements for: the long term unemployed, apprentices and graduates and a six month pilot is currently in place. Such clauses will necessarily be compliant with existing procurement regulations.

Libraries NI: Appointment of Chairperson

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in light of the resignation of the Chairperson of Libraries NI (i) when she intends to appoint a new Chairperson; (ii) who will act as Chairperson of the Board of Libraries NI until a successor is appointed; and (iii) when she will appoint a full complement of councillors to the Board of Libraries NI.

(AQW 1901/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- (i) In light of the resignation of the Chairperson of Libraries NI, I intend to appoint a new Chairperson as quickly as possible. The Appointment process has already commenced, and is being treated as urgent.
- (ii) It is my intention to appoint an Interim Chairperson before the end of September 2011 to act as Chairperson of the Board of Libraries NI.
- (iii) Officials are currently working on the process of appointing further Councillor members to the Libraries NI Board so that there is a full complement. The appointment process is likely to take a number of months to complete.

Department of Education

Schools: Deficit

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the current deficit of (i) primary schools; and (ii) post-primary schools, broken down by (a) school type; and (b) Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 1618/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education):

The latest full financial year for which this data is currently available is 2009/10. The data requested for each Education and Library Board Area is contained in the tables below.

BELFAST EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD AREA

School Type	Total Cumulative Deficit Amount at 31st March 2010
Controlled Primary	-£2,085,325
Maintained Primary	-£443,926
Controlled Integrated Primary	0
Irish Medium Primary	-£115,845
Other Maintained Primary	0
Controlled Post-Primary	-£309,198
Maintained Post-Primary	-£1,712,003
Controlled Integrated Post-Primary	0
Irish Medium Post-Primary	-£70,013
Controlled Grammar	0
Total	-£4,736,310

NORTH EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD AREA

School Type	Total Cumulative Deficit Amount at 31st March 2010
Controlled Primary	-£507,559
Maintained Primary	-£239,311
Controlled Integrated Primary	-£166,053
Irish Medium Primary	-£1,320
Other Maintained Primary	-£214
Controlled Post-Primary	-£697,227
Maintained Post-Primary	-£140,720
Controlled Integrated Post-Primary	-£199,067
Irish Medium Post-Primary	0
Controlled Grammar	-£165,376
Total	-£2,116,847

SOUTH EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD AREA

School Type	Total Cumulative Deficit Amount at 31st March 2010
Controlled Primary	-£450,627
Maintained Primary	-£123,981
Controlled Integrated Primary	-£25,985
Irish Medium Primary	-£4,479
Other Maintained Primary	0
Controlled Post-Primary	-£79,759
Maintained Post-Primary	-£292,364
Controlled Integrated Post-Primary	-£34,965
Irish Medium Post-Primary	0
Controlled Grammar	0
Total	-£1,012,160

SOUTHERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD AREA

School Type	Total Cumulative Deficit Amount at 31st March 2010
Controlled Primary	-£403,491
Maintained Primary	-£638,558
Controlled Integrated Primary	0
Irish Medium Primary	-£3,217
Other Maintained Primary	-£55,631
Controlled Post-Primary	-£305,420
Maintained Post-Primary	-£589,419
Controlled Integrated Post-Primary	0
Irish Medium Post-Primary	0
Controlled Grammar	0
Total	-£1,995,736

WESTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD AREA

School Type	Total Cumulative Deficit Amount at 31st March 2010
Controlled Primary	-£52,736
Maintained Primary	-£161,380
Controlled Integrated Primary	£0
Irish Medium Primary	£0

Other Maintained Primary	£0
Controlled Post-Primary	-£84,194
Maintained Post-Primary	-£297,163
Controlled Integrated Post-Primary	£0
Irish Medium Post-Primary	£0
Controlled Grammar	£0
Total	-£595,473

1979/10 Circular

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Education what policy has overtaken the 1979/10 circular 'The Greater Involvement of Young People in Northern Ireland'; and (ii) based on what advice did he consider the withdrawal of the circular.

(AQW 1656/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

- (i) DE Circular 1979/10 which is titled "The Greater Involvement of Young People in the Youth Service" was published by the Department in 1979 and set out structural and funding arrangements considered necessary 32 years ago when the participation of young people was a relatively new concept. The wider participation environment for young people today is very different.

Since 1979, structures and good practice, as well as policy, have enabled the development of the participation environment. The development of new participation structures, the formal and non formal education curricula, and importantly, youth work practice, have all evolved significantly. Participation of young people in the youth service is now supported and encouraged as a matter of good practice and underpins the approach to work in this area. The introduction of 'A Model for Effective Practice' in 1997, its relaunch in 2003 and the recent launch of the guidance for part-time workers and volunteers "3 Core Principles" highlight the importance of participation as a key element of the youth work process.

- (ii) Officials reviewed the 1979 circular in detail to assess whether the provisions remained relevant before its withdrawal was considered. In carrying out this review, a number of discussions were held, both within the department and also with colleagues and interested parties such as the Youth Council and the Youth Forum. The review concluded that the provisions of the circular were not reflective of the current and emerging participation environment or consistent with the current funding schemes for youth work supported by DE or the governance and accountability requirements for funding.

I am committed to the active participation of young people in society and education and will seek to strengthen the arrangements for participation of young people within a much broader educational context through the youth service as part of the forthcoming "Priorities for Youth" policy.

Teaching Posts

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the guidelines for advertising teaching posts; (ii) the number of teaching posts that have been filled in the last 12 months, broken down by Education and Library Board; and (iii) how many of these posts were publicly advertised.

(AQW 1687/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

- (i) The Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools have separate but similar advertising policies contained in their respective Teaching Appointment Schemes. As a general rule, these require that positions expected to last six months or more should be publicly advertised. There are a number of exceptions including teachers appointed to comply with the requirements of the Fixed Term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations (N I) 2002 (where the teachers concerned have been employed continuously on fixed term contracts for a period of four years or more).
- (ii) The numbers of teaching posts filled in each education and library board area in the last 12 months and
- (iii) the numbers of these posts that were publicly advertised are as follows:

E&L Board Area	Posts Filled*	No of these Posts Advertised
Belfast	83	72
Western	148	148
North-Eastern	155	110
South-Eastern	164	164
Southern	147	147

* Excludes voluntary grammar and grant maintained integrated schools.

Department of Education: Non-executive Director

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education (i) why his Department has appointed a non-executive director to its departmental board; and (ii) to detail the remuneration for this appointment.

(AQW 1703/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

- i) Independent non-executive directors are appointed to the Boards of all departments within the Executive to provide:-
- constructive challenge across the Board's business;
 - a fresh, objective perspective and new ideas;
 - improved rigour to Board processes;
 - specific expertise and experience;
 - a safe sounding board for new approaches; and
 - a balance to the mix of skills and personalities on the Board.

The recent appointment was to replace an outgoing non-executive director.

- ii) The remuneration of a non-executive director is £10,000 per annum.

Schools: Register of Premises and Accommodation

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education whether there is a register of all school premises and accommodation owned and operated by (i) the Education and Library Boards; (ii) the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools; and (iii) other educational bodies whose students are funded by his Department.

(AQW 1732/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Library Boards operate a database known as Manhattan that contains details of schools in all sectors and school related buildings in the controlled and maintained sectors.

This is a live system and is utilised for recording information for schools in all education sectors provided they are receiving funding by the Department.

Within the database a unique Department of Education number defines the Education and Library Board area in which the building is located, the type of institution and the management type ie whether belonging to the controlled, maintained or other educational sectors.

There may however be a small number of schools that are not included in the Manhattan database. These schools may be those that have recently been either in receipt of a new school build or refurbishment or alternatively been procured using private finance.

Maghera High School Site

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education what plans his Department has for the site of Maghera High School.

(AQW 1775/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: A Development Proposal to close Maghera High School was approved by the Department and the school closed on 31 August 2009. In accordance with procedures on the disposal of public sector assets, the matter was referred to the Central Advisory Unit (CAU) of LPS for central clearing.

Following interest by both CnaG and CCMS in the Maghera High School site, the Department wrote to the NEELB in December 2010 requesting that it did not demolish the property, or proceed with the open market sale of the site at this time to allow for further exploration of other potential educational uses.

To date, the Department has received no development proposals in relation to the Maghera High School site.

Education: Language Strategy

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education (i) whether his Department has commissioned a report on the Language Strategy; and (ii) the current position on the report and when it will be published.

(AQW 1813/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department commissioned a report containing recommendations that might inform a modern languages strategy and has received a near final draft of that report from the QUB/UU Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies. The original commission, which predated the restoration of devolution, envisaged a wide ranging report that would focus on the place of language learning not just in schools but for the economy and for society more generally.

After engagement with other relevant departments, the feedback received has been relayed to the two universities and I expect that they will be in a position to submit their final report to me very shortly. Recognising that it will contain recommendations for other Ministers, I intend to circulate the final report to the Executive. As Education Minister I will also be looking carefully, within the resources available to me, at how best to move forward on those recommendations that are focused on the teaching and learning of modern languages in schools.

Schools: Enrolment Numbers in the East Derry Area

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the current enrolment numbers for each (a) primary school; and (b) post-primary school in the East Derry area; and (ii) for his assessment of the extent to which the schools in each sector are non-viable.

(AQW 1931/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

- (i) The current enrolment numbers for each (a) primary school and (b) post-primary school in the East Derry area are in the table below.

- (ii) The educational viability of a school is assessed against the six criteria as set out in the Sustainable Schools Policy, taking account of the school's individual circumstances. It is in the first instance a matter for the school managing authorities to determine the viability of schools and, where they are found to be non-viable, to bring forward proposals for consideration by the Department. Until such times as an area based approach to planning is developed and an assessment of each school is made in that context I am not in a position to comment on viability of schools in a particular area.

PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE EAST DERRY CONSTITUENCY – 2010/11

School	Total Enrolment	Enrolment Excluding Nursery & Reception (If Different)
Bellarena Primary School	35	
Ballykelly Primary School	267	241
Drumachose Primary School	228	
Cumber Claudy Primary School	131	
Limavady Central Primary School	475	
Drumrane Primary School	89	
St Canice's Primary School	104	
St Anthony's Primary School	32	
St Matthew's Primary School	86	
Termoncanice Primary School	560	508
St Mary's Primary School	199	
Listress Primary School	30	
Faughanvale Primary School	151	
St Aidan's Primary School Magilligan	43	
St Canice's Primary School	361	334
St Colmcille's Primary School	264	238
St Peter's & St Paul's Primary School	57	
St Finlough's Primary School, Sistrakeel	55	
St John's Primary School , dernaflaw	137	
St Mary's Gortnaghey Primary School	35	
Roe Valley Integrated Primary School	158	
Portrush Primary School	199	
Ballytober Primary School	66	
Carnalridge Primary School	170	
Culcrow Primary School	60	
Cullycapple Primary School	30	
Damhead Primary School	180	

School	Total Enrolment	Enrolment Excluding Nursery & Reception (If Different)
Hezlett Primary School	240	232
Killowen Primary School	168	
Portstewart Primary School	254	228
Millburn Primary School	413	
Kilrea Primary School	75	
D H Christie Memorial Primary School	403	
Castleroe Primary School	74	71
Macosquin Primary School	195	189
Harpurs Hill Primary School	203	175
Gorran Primary School	90	
Garvagh Primary School	124	
Ballysally Primary School	192	
Irish Society's Primary School	382	330
St Patrick's Primary School	85	83
Ballyhackett Primary School	46	43
St Columba's Primary School	100	96
St Colum's Primary School	192	
St Patrick's & St Joseph's Primary School	172	
St Malachy's Primary School	236	233
St John's Primary School	159	
St Columba's Primary School	186	160
Carhill Integrated Primary School	26	
Millstrand Integrated Primary School	193	165

POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE EAST DERRY CONSTITUENCY – 2010/11

School	Total Enrolment	Enrolment Yrs 8-12	Enrolment Yrs 13-15
Limavady High School	748	653	95
St Mary's Limavady	725	626	99
St Patricks & St Brigids High School	526	526	0
St Patrick's College	336	284	52
Limavady Grammar School	891	654	237
Garvagh High School	120	120	0
Coleraine College	304	261	43

School	Total Enrolment	Enrolment Yrs 8-12	Enrolment Yrs 13-15
St Joseph's College	363	294	69
St Paul's College	328	328	0
North Coast Integrated College	494	414	80
Coleraine High School	813	600	213
Coleraine Academical Institution	760	616	144
Loreto College	796	603	193
Dominican College	491	365	126

Department of Education: Arm's-length Bodies

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost to his Department of its arm's-length bodies in each of the last two years.

(AQW 1948/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The cost to the Department of Education of its arm's-length bodies in 2010-11 and 2009-10 is shown in the following table:

	2010-11 £'000	2009-10 £'000
Belfast Education and Library Board	257,785	252,541
North-Eastern Education and Library Board	323,809	326,009
Southern Education and Library Board	348,118	346,228
South-Eastern Education and Library Board	281,806	288,696
Western Education and Library Board	325,412	324,260
Staff Commission for Education and Library Boards	362	385
NI Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment	20,201	20,916
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools	4,091	5,238
Youth Council for Northern Ireland	4,370	4,412
General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland	73	72
Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal (Note 1)	142	196
Exceptional Circumstances Body (Note 2)	146	-
NI Council for Integrated Education	770	691
Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta	679	637
Total	1,567,764	1,570,281

Note 1 – Responsibility for the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal (SENDIST) transferred from the Department of Education to the Department of Justice with effect from 1 April 2011.

Note 2 – The Exceptional Circumstances Body (ECB) was created on 1 March 2010 and commenced business on 1 June 2010.

Education Network for Northern Ireland

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number and type of contracts that will be replaced as a result of the introduction of the Education Network for Northern Ireland; and (ii) what savings will be made.

(AQW 1963/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: ICT equipment and connectivity in schools is provided largely via the C2k managed service. It is currently funded centrally and is therefore free to schools. The level of provision is designed to ensure that schools are able to meet their statutory requirements to deliver ICT as a cross-curricular skill within the revised curriculum and to assess pupils using ICT as a cross-curricular skill, as well as providing a back office system for data recording, storage and analysis.

C2k is currently taking forward a major procurement exercise to secure a new service provider to deliver the next generation of education technology services under a single contract, to which it refers as EN(ni) – Education Network for Northern Ireland. These services will have added value as a result of recent technical developments and will offer schools greater flexibility and choice.

This new contract will replace the existing contracts, known as Lots, for: Local Area Networks, including PCs and laptops, in post-primary and special schools (Lot 3) and in primary schools (Lot 6); Wide Area Networking, which provides secure access to the Internet, e-mail and the LearningNI virtual learning environment (Lot 5); and the software licence to provide schools with a management information system.

Expenditure on C2k contracts from 2000/2001 to the end of the 2010/11 financial year has been some £363 million.

Through a procurement which makes the most of the general downturn in ICT prices, the Department intends to reduce spending in this area by £60 million over the 4 years of the current spending round (2011/12 to 2014/15).

The procurement is in its latter stages, with an Appointment of Bidder business case (ABC) currently being considered by the Department. Subject to approval of the ABC by the Department of Finance and Personnel, a Full Business Case will follow in October, and award of contract is projected for the end of November 2011.

C2k Contracts

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of C2k contracts since its introduction.
(AQW 1966/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: ICT equipment and connectivity in schools is provided largely via the C2k managed service. It is currently funded centrally and is therefore free to schools. The level of provision is designed to ensure that schools are able to meet their statutory requirements to deliver ICT as a cross-curricular skill within the revised curriculum and to assess pupils using ICT as a cross-curricular skill, as well as providing a back office system for data recording, storage and analysis.

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The procurement is in its latter stages, with an Appointment of Bidder business case (ABC) currently being considered by the Department. Subject to approval of the ABC by the Department of Finance and Personnel, a Full Business Case will follow in October, and award of contract is projected for the end of November 2011.

Education Network for Northern Ireland

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the introduction of the Education Network for Northern Ireland contract.

(AQW 1967/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: ICT equipment and connectivity in schools is provided largely via the C2k managed service. It is currently funded centrally and is therefore free to schools. The level of provision is designed to ensure that schools are able to meet their statutory requirements to deliver ICT as a cross-curricular skill within the revised curriculum and to assess pupils using ICT as a cross-curricular skill, as well as providing a back office system for data recording, storage and analysis.

C2k is currently taking forward a major procurement exercise to secure a new service provider to deliver the next generation of education technology services under a single contract, to which it refers as EN(ni) – Education Network for Northern Ireland. These services will have added value as a result of recent technical developments and will offer schools greater flexibility and choice.

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Expenditure on C2k contracts from 2000/2001 to the end of the 2010/11 financial year has been some £363 million.

Through a procurement which makes the most of the general downturn in ICT prices, the Department intends to reduce spending in this area by £60 million over the 4 years of the current spending round (2011/12 to 2014/15).

The procurement is in its latter stages, with an Appointment of Bidder business case (ABC) currently being considered by the Department. Subject to approval of the ABC by the Department of Finance and Personnel, a Full Business Case will follow in October, and award of contract is projected for the end of November 2011.

1979/10 Circular

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Education (i) whether he is aware of the decision taken by his Department to withdraw 1979/10 circular 'The Greater Involvement of Young People in Northern Ireland', which creates a formal relationship between his Department and the NI Youth Forum; and (ii) whether he would consider postponing the decision until the Committee for Education has further considered this matter.

(AQW 1979/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

- (i) I was consulted on the decision to withdraw DE Circular 1979/10, which is entitled 'The Greater Involvement of Young People in the Youth Service'. Following the establishment of the Youth Council in 1990, the Youth Council assumed the responsibility for funding Regional Voluntary Youth organisations in the north of Ireland, including the Youth Forum and thereby changing the relationship between the Department of Education and the Youth Forum.

- (ii) The circular was published by the Department of Education in 1979 and set out structural and funding arrangements considered necessary 32 years ago when the participation of young people was a relatively new concept. The wider participation environment for young people today is very different.

I welcome the Committee for Education's interest in this matter. However, the provisions of the circular are not being adhered to and are not enforced. Furthermore, as the removal of the circular does not diminish in any way the ability of the Forum, or any other representative group, to have their views heard and considered by officials and Ministers, I am not inclined to delay the withdrawal of the circular.

School Transport

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Education when he intends to review his Department's Home to School Transport policy.

(AQW 2043/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have already indicated to the Education Committee my view that we need to examine every aspect of the arrangements for home to school transport to identify scope for savings that can be released to support teaching and learning in classrooms.

It is in line with this that the Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit of the Department of Finance and Personnel was engaged to review this area (amongst others) to explore the scope for efficiencies. Stage 1 of the review, published in March 2011, identified the Education and Library Board operational arrangements for home to school transport as an area for further investigation at Stage 2. I am currently awaiting the outcome of Stage 2 of the review.

While it will focus primarily on the scope for improving efficiency and reducing costs within the existing policy framework, I expect that it will also signal areas where policy change could yield further savings and I will want to consider those and other areas carefully and in the context of the wider financial climate before bringing forward any proposals for change.

Schools: Sharing Resources or Classes

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the primary schools and post-primary schools currently involved in sharing resources or classes; and (ii) to provide an estimate of the savings made from schools sharing resources or classes.

(AQW 2051/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department does not hold the information requested. However, I know that many schools, both primary and post primary, do work together at a number of levels; post primary schools work in collaboration with each other in Area Learning Communities to deliver a wider range of courses for pupils from key Stage 4 and above and in many other areas, including the provision of out-of-school sporting and enrichment activities. The Extended Schools programme encourages neighbouring schools to share resources and facilities which benefits both pupils and the wider community in that it provides access to a greater range of opportunities. Of the schools eligible for the 2011/12 ES programme 434 (96%) are working in partnership with neighbouring schools.

While it is not possible to estimate savings when schools work together benefits accrue for the teachers involved, the pupils and the wider school and local community. I believe that schools working together to share resources and expertise can enhance the educational experience for the whole school community and can help to break down barriers – actual or perceived – through joint working. Schools working collaboratively in Area Learning Communities, for example, are able to reduce duplication and provide new opportunities for pupils that otherwise might not be available. One of the most positive developments over the last number of years has been the role the special schools sector has played in increasing collaborative delivery for pupils at these schools in partnership with mainstream schools.

Department for Employment and Learning

Northern Regional College: Campus at Ballymoney

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) to outline his plans for the long-term sustainability of the Northern Regional College campus at Ballymoney; (ii) which courses are currently taught at this campus; and (iii) what additional courses will be developed and delivered at this campus in future.

(AQW 1594/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): The Northern Regional College (NRC) and the Southern Regional College have jointly submitted a Strategic Outline Case (SOC) for the development of their estates. The SOC has been approved by my Department and by the Department of Finance and Personnel. The SOC, which is a high level examination of the issues and a range of options, has proposed a rationalisation of NRC's campuses, including the possible co-location of Coleraine and Ballymoney. Co-location on a permanent basis will require further examination through the completion of a more detailed Outline Business Case which is likely to take the colleges at least eighteen months to complete. No decisions will be taken on the future of the Ballymoney Campus ahead of the Outline Business Case being concluded and considered. It is important that an open mind is maintained with respect to the options for future provision in the Ballymoney area.

In the current academic year the Ballymoney campus is offering 56 full and part time further education courses across a range of academic and vocational areas. Two higher education courses are also on offer. Full details can be found at the following web address: http://www.nrc.ac.uk/course_search_details.asp?campus=3&type=0&category=0

Regarding future course provision, while the Department sets the strategic direction for the Further Education Sector, it is the responsibility of the individual colleges to design and deliver a curriculum offering that meets the needs of learners and employers across their areas. Northern Regional College will therefore be responsible for deciding the provision that will be made available at its Ballymoney campus.

Students from Northern Ireland Studying in the Republic of Ireland

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much his Department has spent on (i) fees; (ii) bursaries; and (iii) loans for students from Northern Ireland studying in the Republic of Ireland in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1606/11-15)

Dr Farry: All Northern Ireland domiciled students studying in the Republic of Ireland are eligible to have their university registration fee paid. In addition they can apply for a maintenance loan and higher education bursary, both of which are means tested. Details of the amounts paid in the last 5 academic years are detailed in the table overleaf.

Academic Year	Registration Fee £k	Maintenance Loan £k	Higher Education Bursary £k	Total £k
2005/06	404	1,867	276	2,547
2006/07	393	2,131	314	2,838
2007/08	489	2,261	301	3,051
2008/09	624	2,294	324	3,242
2009/10	1,047	2,370	361	3,778

Further Education Colleges: Student Enrolments

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the (i) maximum capacity; and (ii) number of students enrolled in each regional college, including the Belfast Metropolitan College, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1800/11-15)

Dr Farry:

- (i) The Department does not hold information on the maximum capacity of Further Education Colleges. Maximum capacity is complex, and would be determined by a number of factors including, for example, the fact that most courses have minimum and maximum class sizes to take account of course viability and quality considerations respectively. In addition, the minimum and maximum range is likely to vary according to the type of provision being delivered. Actual enrolments on individual courses will vary between these minimum and maximum numbers. Therefore, the Department is not in a position to provide information on the maximum capacity of Further Education Colleges.
- (ii) The tables below detail the number of enrolments at the Northern Ireland Further Education (FE) Colleges in each of the last three years for which data are available. These enrolments include all provision delivered by the Colleges which includes mainstream FE, Higher Education, Essential Skills, Entitlement Framework, cost recovery and training and have been broken down by professional and technical (i.e. those with a qualification aim) and non-professional and technical.

PROFESSIONAL AND TECHNICAL ENROLMENTS AT NI FE COLLEGES

FE College	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Belfast Metropolitan	38,046	37,594	42,567
Northern Regional	21,089	19,822	21,654
South Eastern Regional	21,760	23,465	26,044
Southern Regional	27,209	27,309	32,839
South West	17,004	17,148	20,005
North West Regional	16,992	17,148	20,241
Total	142,100	142,486	163,350

Source: Further Education Statistical Record

NON PROFESSIONAL AND TECHNICAL ENROLMENTS AT NI FE COLLEGES

FE College	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Belfast Metropolitan	12,603	13,460	12,288
Northern Regional	7,093	4,359	4,146
South Eastern Regional	6,102	4,561	3,500
Southern Regional	9,358	7,970	7,542
South West	6,403	5,696	4,796
North West Regional	4,450	4,341	4,972
Total	46,009	40,387	37,244

Source: Further Education Statistical Record

TOTAL ENROLMENTS AT NI FE COLLEGES

FE College	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Belfast Metropolitan	50,649	51,054	54,855
Northern Regional	28,182	24,181	25,800
South Eastern Regional	27,862	28,026	29,544
Southern Regional	36,567	35,279	40,381
South West	23,407	22,844	24,801
North West Regional	21,442	21,489	25,213
Total	188,109	182,873	200,594

Source: Further Education Statistical Record

Notes: (1) The latest available data are for 2009/10.

Student Fees in Great Britain

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in light of the increase in student fees in Great Britain, whether her Department has any plans to assist veterinary students who travel there to study.

(AQW 1941/11-15)

Dr Farry: Veterinary students can avail of the standard student financial support package, including (subject to approval of the appropriate legislation) from academic year 2012/2013, tuition fee loans of up to £9000, maintenance loans of up to £6,780, maintenance grant of up to £3,475 and supplementary grants, including childcare grant and disabled students' allowances. Any additional financial assistance for veterinary students who travel to Great Britain would be a matter for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, who hold the policy remit for veterinary students.

Educational Funding: Kilcooley Women's Centre, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to help with educational funding for Kilcooley Women's Centre, Bangor.

(AQW 1972/11-15)

Dr Farry: I refer the Member to my previous answer. AQW 412/11-15

DEL: Arm's-length Bodies

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the cost to his Department of its arm's-length bodies in each of the last two years.

(AQW 2067/11-15)

Dr Farry: The cost to the Department for Employment and Learning of its Arms Length Bodies in each of the last two years was as follows;

	2010/11 £'000	2009/10 £'000
Construction Industry Training Board	-	-
Ulster Supported Employment Agency	634	621
Labour Relations Agency	3,110	3,695

The cost represents Grant in Aid paid to each organisation by the Department, as reported in the Annual Resource Accounts. Construction Industry Training Board is funded through a statutory levy for the purposes of encouraging employers to participate in training and to fund the Board's activities.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Invest NI

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of whether the level of funding awarded by Invest NI to encourage companies to set up would be affected by a reduction in the Corporation Tax rate.

(AQW 1566/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): A key advantage for Northern Ireland in securing a lower corporation tax rate is that this will enable Invest NI to pursue target markets in which it currently cannot compete. A reduction in corporation tax will not only attract foreign investment, but, importantly, it will promote Northern Ireland as a place where investors might increase profits, rather than as a place to reduce costs.

If Northern Ireland were to secure a lower rate of Corporation Tax, Invest NI would still wish to pursue the existing FDI markets where grant assistance plays a critical role and therefore it would be necessary to have financial incentives available. It would also help to offset the impact of the reductions in SFA thresholds which came into force on 1 January 2011 and have constrained Invest NI's ability to leverage FDI through higher levels of grant support.

It is not therefore anticipated that the current levels of funding awarded by Invest NI will be reduced.

Start A Business Programme

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in relation to the Invest NI 'Start A Business Programme' (i) to detail the criteria for receiving financial assistance after completion of the Programme; (ii) what further advice or support is available to those who complete the Programme but are not offered financial assistance; and (iii) what focus is made on rural development and enterprise by the Programme.

(AQW 1607/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest Northern Ireland's Go For It programme is targeted at early stage entrepreneurs and offers individuals a bespoke package of training and support to improve business capability. Participants are given advice on finance, marketing, sales and business planning to give their business the best possible chance of success, equipping the individual to develop their own business plan. The Programme does not offer financial support to the business start up.

Alongside the programme, the Short Term Employment Scheme (STES) provides business start incentive support. STES encompasses a set of measures to provide assistance over the next four years to 2015, with the aim of increasing employment and improving employability.

The business start incentive grant provides support to both participants on the "Go For It" programme from the identified 36 Neighbourhood Renewal Areas (NRAs) and to young people aged between 16 – 24 not in education, employment or training who complete the programme to business plan approval stage and who subsequently start a business and trade independently.

Invest NI and other stakeholders, including Councils, provide a range of business support programmes for the wider business base post business start up.

The Go For It programme is delivered across Northern Ireland, including rural areas, and since 2009 41% of the business plan completions have been from rural areas.

Hydraulic Fracturing

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given that a company suspended its hydraulic fracturing activities in Blackpool after two minor earthquakes were related to its work, what steps her Department has taken to ensure that any hydraulic fracturing being carried out in Northern Ireland does not damage the environment.

(AQW 1665/11-15)

Mrs Foster: No applications have been made to carry out hydraulic fracturing in Northern Ireland and it is unlikely that such an application will be submitted before 2014. The Department of the Environment has primary responsibility for environmental protection but DETI will work closely with DOE to ensure that the activities that are specific to shale gas exploration are adequately regulated and monitored. In the interim, DETI and NIEA will consult with their counterparts in GB and Ireland, and take into account the recommendations of recent and forthcoming studies from the USA, to ensure that appropriate controls in Northern Ireland conform to highest regulatory standards.

Exploratory Drilling of Shale Gas

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail any licences that have been issued for the exploratory drilling of shale gas, including whether there are any conditions on which chemicals are permitted for use.

(AQW 1694/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Four petroleum licences have been issued in Northern Ireland in 2011, one of which is for shale gas in County Fermanagh issued to Tamboran Resources Pty Ltd. However, no exploration drilling can be carried out without additional consents from several regulatory authorities including DETI, HSENI, Planning Service and NIEA. Should a drilling application be submitted, the transport, storage and use of chemicals would be regulated under the relevant legislation to prevent the input of hazardous substances into groundwater, and for pollution prevention and control. In any case, the company has stated that they would not use any chemical additives for hydraulic fracturing.

Hydraulic Fracturing: Fermanagh

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether an Environmental Impact Assessment has been carried out on the proposed hydraulic fracturing in Fermanagh.

(AQW 1695/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department has not yet received an application for consent to drill from Tamboran Resources Pty Ltd on the petroleum licence they hold in Fermanagh. If the company wishes to drill an exploration well, and carry out hydraulic fracturing, they are required to submit an application for planning permission which will be subject to an Environmental Impact Assessment. In addition, DETI would carry out a Habitats Regulation Assessment of the potential impact of the proposed drilling programme on Natura 2000 sites. These processes would inform any decision as to whether, and under what conditions, drilling could proceed.

Unemployed Trained Teachers

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of unemployed trained teachers currently available for work.

(AQW 1733/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Northern Ireland Claimant Count data can be used to provide information on the number of unemployment benefit claimants, whose usual or sought occupation is as a 'Teaching Professional'. Since the number of unemployed teachers fluctuates month on month in line with the academic year, it is best to provide the average monthly number of claimants during the last year.

In the year to August 2011, an average of 660 unemployed claimants stated that their usual occupation was that of a Teaching Professional. During the same period, an average of 775 unemployed claimants stated they were seeking employment as a Teaching Professional.

Cruise Liners

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) to detail the number of cruise liners that have docked in the bay of Ballycastle, or any other bay along the North coast, in each of the last four years; (ii) to provide details of the cruise liners that docked; and (iii) what plans are in place to increase the number of cruise liners visiting the North Antrim coast.

(AQW 1743/11-15)

Mrs Foster: (i)

The number of cruise ships that have docked in Ballycastle or any other bay along the North Coast in the last four years are detailed below:-

BALLYCASTLE HARBOUR

2011	4 cruise ships
2010	2 cruise ships
2009	1 cruise ship

PORTRUSH HARBOUR

2011	3 cruise ships
2010	9 cruise ships
2009	4 cruise ships
2008	4 cruise ships

(ii)

DETAILS OF CRUISE LINERS AT BALLYCASTLE HARBOUR

Date	Ship	Passengers	Crew	Dock
23/09/2011	Hebridean Princess	43 To be confirmed	38 To be confirmed	Ballycastle Harbour
03/09/2011	Silver Cloud	250	190	Tender Port Ballycastle
08/06/2011	Hebridean Princess	47	38	Ballycastle Harbour
04/05/2011	Ocean Nova	70	38	Anchored Rathin Bay
08/08/2010	Hebridean Princess	43	36	TBC
21/06/2010	Hebridean Princess	35	40	TBC
09/05/2009	Polar Star	90	40	Anchored Rathlin Bay

DETAILS OF CRUISE LINERS AT PORTRUSH HARBOUR

Date	Ship	Passengers	Crew	Dock
25/08/2011	MS Clipper Odyssey	Not available	Not known	Portrush
08/07/2011	MS Clipper Odyssey	79	Not known	Portrush
29/06/2011	MV Minerva	191	Not known	Portrush
11/10/2010	MS Quest	Not available	Not known	Portrush/onward to Port Ellen, Islay
25/07/2010	Ms Prince Albert 11	Not available	Not known	Portrush
22/07/2010	MS Prince Albert 11	Not available	Not known	Portrush
24/06/2010	Ms Island Sky	Not available	Not known	Portrush/onward to Rathlin
19/06/2010	Ms Expedition	Not available	Not known	Portrush/onward to Belfast
26/05/2010	Ms Prince Albert	Not available	Not known	Portrush
09/05/2010	MS Polar Star	Not available	Not known	Portrush/onward to Rathlin
07/05/2010	MS Expedition	91	Not known	Portrush/onward to Rathlin
07/05/2010	MS Expedition	Not available	Not known	Portrush/onward to Rathlin
28/08/2009	MV Le Diamant	Not available	Not known	Portrush
09/06/2009	MV Clipper Adventure	Not available	Not known	Portrush/onward to Rathlin
26/05/2009	MC Island Sky	Not available	Not known	Portrush/onward to Iona
09/05/2009	MV Expedition	Not available	Not known	Portrush/onward to Rathlin
08/09/2008	MV Island Sky	Not available	Not known	Portrush/onward to Rathlin
04/06/2008	MV Island Sky	108	Not known	Portrush
25/05/2008	MV Island Sky	82	Not known	Portrush
15/05/2008	MV Island Sky	100	Not known	Portrush

(iii)

The Moyle Harbour Master, in conjunction with the Council's Tourism Officer, plan to compile a destination data sheet of the relevant harbour/anchorage information including a guidance to local attractions and services that are available to the passengers and to promote the area as a preferred mid-cruise location.

To date “Hebridean Princess” is due to visit Ballycastle on 23/09/11, 22/08/12 and 31/08/12 and the “Expedition” at Rathlin on the 27/05/12.

Over the past four years Coleraine Borough Council has forged links with local agents including Hamilton shipping to encourage uptake of Portrush Harbour as a port of call for cruise ships. On numerous occasions the Council extended a welcome to the various ships, in particular by arranging a piper to play as the passengers arrived on shore. Staff also made a point of welcoming the Captain and encouraging repeat visits.

Northern Ireland Tourist Board

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assistance, financial or otherwise, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board has provided to agricultural shows and country fairs in each of the last three years; and for a breakdown of the assistance provided to each event.

(AQW 1849/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In 2009/10, the DCAL Events Fund supported the Great Games Fairs of Ireland £20,000 and the National Country Sports Fair £25,000 of financial assistance.

In 2010/2011, the DCAL Events Fund (administered by NITB) awarded the Great Games Fair of Ireland £7,000 and the National Country Sports Fair £10,000 of financial assistance.

In 2011/2012, the NITB Events Fund awarded the Great Games Fair of Ireland £15,000 and the National Country Sports Fair £15,000 of financial assistance.

No agricultural shows have applied for funding in recent years.

At the 2011 Balmoral Show the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) in partnership with Food NI promoted Northern Ireland food in the Good Food Pavilion. Northern Ireland Signature Dishes were created using the best local produce to showcase the quality of Northern Ireland food, our proud food traditions and heritage and distinctive food culture. The total project cost of the promotion was £18,000.

NITB also provides coverage for events which might be of interest to visitors on www.discovernorthernireland.com. The events covered are those which have been notified to us in advance by the event organisers or are provided by the local Tourist Information Centre (TIC) network, Regional Tourism Partnerships (RTPs) or relevant local authorities.

All events funded under the NITB Tourism Event Funding Programme are promoted through this site.

Asbestos Material

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the number of people who have died in the last three years as a result of exposure to asbestos material; and (ii) what steps his Department has taken to raise awareness of the danger of this material in its various forms.

(AQW 1877/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The table below records the number of deaths from asbestos related disease in Northern Ireland in the three year period 2008/10.

Year	Mesothelioma	Asbestosis	Total
2008	38	3	41
2009	42	5	47
2010 ^p	35	4	39

p – provisional figures supplied by the General Register Office (GRO)

The Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI), has in the past three years, delivered a range of awareness raising initiatives to highlight the risks from exposure to asbestos and encourage compliance with legislation. These have included a campaign aimed at the 40,000 tradesmen who might encounter asbestos when working on buildings containing asbestos and a campaign aimed at those who own or manage some 60,000 non-domestic properties. These campaigns are supplemented by HSENI's Asbestos Advisory Service which offers free advice and guidance to the general public.

Go for It Programme

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment why InvestNI withdrew the Go For It Programme from Enterprise Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2124/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest Northern Ireland has not withdrawn the contract to deliver the Go for It element of the Enterprise Development Programme from Enterprise Northern Ireland. Invest NI has developed a new programme specification and a procurement exercise was conducted by the Central Procurement Directorate(CPD) within DFP on behalf of Invest NI with a view to appoint suppliers to provide the management and delivery of the new programme. Following the evaluation of the tenders CPD issued an intention to award the contract to the successful tendering organisation. Enterprise Northern Ireland was unsuccessful in securing the contract and has now issued a legal challenge. As this matter is subject to legal proceedings I am not at liberty to comment further.

Department of the Environment

DOE: Procurement

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to procurement by his Department (i) on how many occasions since May 2007 a supplier has been secured through a single tender action in advance of authorisation by the Accounting Officer and the reasons; (ii) the level of expenditure in each case; (iii) the name of each supplier secured through each single tender action; and (iv) the date on which retrospective approval was granted by the Accounting Officer in each case.

(AQW 1155/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): The requirement to secure Accounting Officer approval for all Single Tender Actions was formalised in June 2010 with the issue of Procurement Guidance Notes 02/10 and 03/10 by the Department of Finance and Personnel's Central Procurement Directorate.

Prior to the introduction of these Procurement Guidance Notes, there was no formal system in place in the Department to accurately capture the number of Single Tender Actions that may have taken place. In the absence of such a system, and due to the volume of contracts in place, it is not possible to provide an accurate assessment of the number of Single Tender Actions that may have been approved without first securing Accounting Officer approval for prior years without incurring disproportionate costs.

Since the introduction of the Procurement Guidance Notes, specifically 02/10, a formal system has been put in place to ensure all Single Tender Actions are subject to the Department's Principal Accounting Officer's approval. The Department now maintains a record of all Single Tender Actions which are reported to and monitored by the Departmental Audit and Risk Committee.

Since the introduction of the new system in 2010-11, only one contract did not have the appropriate Accounting Officer approval before awarding. This was in relation to a contract, at a cost of £11,000, awarded to Dr Les Brown for the monitoring and analysis at Fardrum Roosky, an area of special scientific interest. The work on this contract concluded in March 2011 and a case for retrospective approval is currently being finalised.

In addition to the above controls, I have now require that all Single Tender Actions in respect of consultancy projects must have my prior approval before awarding.

Planning System

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what discussions his Department has had with its counterpart in Westminster on its plans for simplifying the planning system and what lessons could be learned for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1589/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department is broadly aware plans for simplifying the English planning system, as it is of developments in planning in Scotland, Wales and Ireland. I am cognisant of these agendas in driving forward planning reform here in the North. I must say that some of the proposals emerging from London would not have my sympathy.

However, simplification and acceleration of the planning system and applications respectively are measures against which I will judge progress and judge myself.

George Best Belfast City Airport

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment whether there has been any postal or email correspondence between his Department and George Best Belfast City Airport during 2011 on a proposed indicative noise contour.

(AQW 1632/11-15)

Mr Attwood: There has been no postal or email correspondence between my Department and George Best Belfast City Airport during 2011 on a proposed indicative noise contour. My officials met with representatives of George Best Belfast City Airport on 3 February, 28 June, and on 4, 18 and 25 August 2011 to discuss planning issues at the airport including the establishment of an indicative noise control contour. I attended the meeting on 25 August 2011. I very much hope that I will be in a position to make an announcement in relation to this matter in the near future.

George Best Belfast City Airport

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has agreed or intends to agree an indicative noise contour for the George Best Belfast City Airport which would contradict the recommendation in the August 2006 report on the Examination in Public into the Belfast City Airport Planning Agreement as outlined in paragraphs 7.1.13.d and 5.7.49 of the report.

(AQW 1633/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I have not agreed an indicative noise control contour for the George Best Belfast City Airport. This matter is under active consideration, have met the airport management and will meet resident representative to, as appropriate, ensure those with interest are kept informed of my approach to the issue

I very much hope that I will be in a position to make an announcement in relation to this matter in the near future.

Car Tax

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment why car tax cannot be paid for with a credit card, but can be paid for with a debit card.

(AQW 1688/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Vehicle licensing is an excepted matter which is the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Transport. It is administered in Northern Ireland by the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) under a formal agreement between my Department and the Department for Transport (DfT).

Currently DVA and DVLA have separate IT systems and processes for administering vehicle registration and licensing services to their respective customers. These differences have resulted in inconsistent services being provided for British and NI customers. Customers in Britain have been able to pay car tax by credit card since 2005, but due to the decision to integrate the NI and IT systems in Britain, DVLA has not funded the work required to make this facility available in NI.

The integration project was suspended by DVLA in 2009 and since then the Department has pressed DVLA to extend to NI the full range of services available to customers in Britain. However, DVLA believes that the most efficient method of delivering these services in NI is through integration of the IT systems.

A feasibility study has been recently undertaken by DVLA to re-examine the potential for integrating the NI and IT systems in Britain. However, no final decisions have yet been taken on the outcomes of this study.

I have written to the Secretary of State for Transport, Philip Hammond about the issue of service provision in NI and I have also written to and met with Mike Penning, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at DfT. I intend to continue to press for the establishment of parity of service provision at the earliest opportunity.

Wild Deer in Northern Ireland

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the current (i) number; (ii) location; and (iii) type of wild deer in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1720/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Wild deer are widely distributed across many habitats but are usually present in low densities. They are also secretive in their habits and are largely nocturnal. It is therefore extremely difficult to make accurate estimations of deer numbers, particularly on a countrywide scale.

NIEA commissioned a desk top study in 2002 of all available records. The resulting report did not give an overall estimate of the deer population in Northern Ireland but listed specific areas within each county which were attributed to population estimates.

The report concluded that there had been an increase in the rate of spread of deer in Northern Ireland over the preceding ten years.

The three resident deer species i.e. Red Deer, Fallow and Sika were recorded in each county in Northern Ireland except Down and Armagh which had no records for Sika.

Muntjac deer, an introduced species, have also been reported from various areas in Northern Ireland but only confirmed present in the Mountstewart area in County Down.

Planning Applications for Wind Farms in North Antrim

Mr Frew asked the Minister of the Environment (i) for his assessment of the number of planning applications for wind farms in the North Antrim area; (ii) how this number fits in with current renewable energy plans; and (iii) for his assessment of whether there are too many wind farms proposed, given the unreliability of wind in producing energy and meeting the energy production targets that exist.

(AQW 1742/11-15)

Mr Attwood:

- (i) The Department currently has 10 planning applications under consideration for wind farm developments in the North Antrim area. In addition there are a further 100 planning applications for the development of single wind turbines. This represents an encouraging response to the very challenging targets in relation to renewable energy production set out in the Strategic Energy Framework for Northern Ireland 2010.

- (ii) The Strategic Energy Framework confirms the Executive's target of 40% of electricity consumption coming from renewable sources by 2020. The 10 wind farm applications in North Antrim, if approved, would make a substantial contribution towards achieving that 40% target.
- (iii) There are currently in the region of 50 wind farm applications across Northern Ireland awaiting determination. If they were all approved they would contribute in the region of 50% of the output required to meet the 2020 targets. Such figures would not suggest that there are too many wind farms proposed. Furthermore the success or otherwise of these, and future, applications will be determined having regard to the merits of each individual site and taking account of all other material planning considerations.

Electricity generated by onshore wind farms is the most established, large-scale source of renewable energy in Northern Ireland. Wind farms will play a vital role in meeting the new renewable electricity target. But it has been recognised that the integration of renewable technologies will incur additional costs in terms of new grid network management requirements as a result of the intermittency of some renewable technologies. Nevertheless a more diverse energy mix is a more secure energy mix.

Rose Energy Poultry Litter Energy Plant

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment why the August 2010 Ministerial announcement on the intention to approve the Rose Energy poultry litter energy plant planning application has not received formal approval; and when a decision will be issued.

(AQW 1756/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The former Minister's announcement of August 2010 was the subject of judicial review proceedings. Lord Justice McCloskey adjourned the judicial review proceedings on 2 March 2011 on the basis that the application process had not been completed.

The applicants subsequently submitted further environmental information that is currently being considered by the Department. When the consideration of this information has been finalised the Department will then make a recommendation to the Minister on the way forward.

Dog Fouling Offences

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of the Environment (i) how many people have been convicted of dog fouling offences in the last twelve months; (ii) how much revenue was raised from the resulting fines; and (iii) what further measures he is taking to combat this problem.

(AQW 1784/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department obtains information concerning dog fouling offences from district councils on a financial year basis only. 89 people were convicted by the courts for dog fouling offences in 2010/11 and a total of £4,451 in fines and £88 in court costs were imposed. The Department does not hold any information on the fines subsequently paid.

In the same period, district councils issued 323 fixed penalty notices (£50) for dog fouling offences resulting in a total of £12,800 received in penalties. Such a notice may be given to a person offering that person the opportunity of discharging any liability to conviction for the dog fouling offence by payment of a fixed penalty.

The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 will strengthen the law in relation to dog fouling by the introduction of a new system of dog control orders.

Under the new system, it will be an offence, subject to certain conditions, for anyone in charge of a dog on land to which a dog control order applies, not to remove the faeces deposited by the dog. A person guilty of the offence will be liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding £1,000 (currently £500 under the Litter (Northern Ireland) Order 1994). The district council will still be able to offer the person the opportunity of discharging any liability to conviction for the offence by payment of a fixed penalty. The district council will have the flexibility, subject to upper and lower limits, to set their own fixed penalty rates, with the default rate being £75.

Tyres: Traceability

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of the Environment what action he is taking to ensure the traceability of used tyres.

(AQO 300/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Controlled Waste (Duty of Care) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002 requires that waste tyres which are controlled waste are handled with due regard and that all reasonable steps are taken to keep the waste safe. The regulations require that a written description be retained, this is in the form of a waste transfer note. Breach of this Duty of Care is an offence, which on summary conviction is liable to a fine not exceeding the statutory maximum or, an unlimited fine if convicted on indictment.

Duty of Care provides an audit trail from the waste producer via carriers to suitably authorized facilities which NIEA can audit on the basis of routine inspection, intelligence received or suspected non compliance. There can be several transfer notes relating to any one waste movement as waste tyres pass through various carriers and waste transfer stations on their way to authorized recovery or export.

Environment Governance

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on his Department's discussion paper on Environmental Governance.

(AQO 301/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department issued the Environmental Governance discussion document on 5th August 2011 setting out a number of options for consideration, seeking feedback from key interests by 9th September 2011. I am currently considering the way forward in light of the responses received, will advise the Environment committee and work to earn their support. Full public consultation will be required on any final proposals which may emerge from this initial exercise.

Tyres: Recycling

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment what percentage of tyres are currently recovered for recycling.

(AQO 302/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Northern Ireland Waste Statistics Regulations requires the Department to provide a waste statistics report every 2 years. In 2008 NIEA recorded that 30,172 tonnes of rubber wastes (mainly end-of-life tyres) were generated and 5,224 tonnes were recovered. The percentage of rubber wastes recovered in 2008 in NI was estimated to be 17.3%.

The last waste tyre survey undertaken for Northern Ireland estimated that 16.10kt of waste tyres were generated in 2000, 30% were sent for retreading and 16% were reused by the farming community.

The Department intends to commission a new waste tyres survey to obtain current data on the quantity of waste tyres generated and the percentage of tyres being reused, recycled, recovered and disposed of by other means. This survey is expected to take 3 months to complete and the data collated will be used locally, nationally and to meet EU reporting requirements.

Listed Buildings

Mr Cree asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the assistance offered to private owners of listed buildings.

(AQO 303/11-15)

Mr Attwood: My assessment is that owners are provided with high quality specialist conservation based advice, by staff in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), and it is supplied free of charge. This is in addition to an appropriate level of grant-aid - which is recognised by organisations like

the Historic Houses Association - as the best central government based grant-aid scheme available for private owners of listed buildings in the UK.

The grant-aid takes full account of the additional cost of using appropriate conservation based materials, techniques and skills that are needed to preserve the character of listed buildings, and, as a result, to help secure all of the economic, social and other benefits, that accrue from a well maintained, utilised and promoted built heritage.

I would, of course, be delighted to provide yet more support, if the resources were available to do so. The Heritage Crime Summit I convened in mid August is to re-convene later this month to identify what actions have been taken in recent weeks and can be taken in the coming period to protect the built heritage, including in respect of our tourist offering.

Gorse Fires

Ms Gildernew asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions he has had with his Executive colleagues in relation to a cross-departmental response to the future management of gorse fires.
(AQO 304/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Following briefing from my officials, meetings with representatives of the Mourne Heritage Trust and seeing for myself some of the wildfire damage this Spring in the Mourne mountains and elsewhere in Northern Ireland, I have written to my Ministerial colleagues in DARD, DRD and DHSSPS to establish an interdepartmental group on wildfires chaired by DOE.

The group held its first meeting on Monday 5 September where terms of reference were agreed and officials highlighted the actions that their Departments had taken since the Spring. Actions for group members to source additional information were agreed as well as a time frame for reporting back to Ministers.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

Mr Girvan asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the public enquiry into the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan; and when it will be published.
(AQO 305/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The BMAP Public Inquiry concluded in May 2008, and since this time the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) has been considering all the information before it prior to completing its report and making its recommendations.

To date, the PAC has delivered several parts of their report to my Department, including the part relating to Strategic Retail Issues (received in January 2009), the part relating to the Strategic Plan Framework (received in March 2011), and the reports on Belfast, Lisburn and Castlereagh Districts (received in July 2011). The Reports on Carrickfergus, North Down and Newtownabbey Districts remain outstanding together with the report on the proposals in the Lagan Valley Regional Park.

The delay in the receipt of the Report in its entirety has inevitably impacted on the process of adopting BMAP. The original timescale for the delivery of the PAC Report was early summer 2010. The Commission, however, stated that due to the number of objections and the complexity of the issues that they raise, it would not be possible to meet this timescale.

Senior officials from my Department have been liaising with the PAC to stress the urgency of receiving a completed report as soon as possible to allow BMAP to be progressed to adoption.

The date of adoption will be dependent on the date that the PAC Report is received in its entirety, and it is unlikely that the Plan will be adopted before the end of 2012. I share frustrations in this regard and am looking at how best to manage Development Plans in the future to reduce the risk of delay and doubt, which is an impediment to sustainable, thoughtful and proper planning.

Election Posters

Mr Brady asked the Minister of the Environment if he will commence a consultation process on legislation to ban the erection of election posters in public areas.

(AQO 306/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I wrote to registered Northern Ireland political parties over the summer in order to establish their views about the suggestion to restrict or ban election posters here. Once I have obtained the views of parties I will consider the merits of looking at the issue in more detail.

Local Government: Reform

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of the Environment when he expects the implementation of the Reform of Local Government to take place.

(AQO 308/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The reform of local government is a key priority and remains very much at the top of my agenda. I have been carefully considering all the key reform issues including boundaries and the implementation timetable as well as taking account of the views expressed by local government representatives and others over the summer period. I now want to engage with my Executive colleagues on the way forward and agree outcomes that provide the clarity and certainty that is required across local government and with those Departments that propose to transfer functions to it.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Civil Service: Equality Monitoring

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what equality monitoring is carried out on the Civil Service workforce.

(AQO 315/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Equality monitoring data is collected from both existing employees and applicants for Civil Service jobs. The information is collected to enable the Northern Ireland Civil Service to meet its statutory obligations under anti-discrimination and equality legislation.

The categories of data currently collected are

- community background;
- gender;
- age;
- disability; and
- ethnic origin.

The collection and processing of equality monitoring data is undertaken to enable employers to determine if their employment policies and practices are fair and offer equality of opportunity to all. But I am conscious that a balance has to be struck between this aim, the requirement to meet statutory obligations, and the need to reduce as far as possible the cost and effort to employers of gathering and processing equality monitoring data. Therefore I have asked officials to ensure that the costs of equality monitoring are kept to a minimum.

Sham Marriages

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many sham marriages have been detected during the last two years.

(AQO 316/11-15)

Mr Wilson: In the last 2 years, suspicions concerning 18 marriages have been referred to the Home Office UK Border Agency (UKBA), all of which have been reported since May this year. UKBA have been active in investigating these reports and 9 were prevented from taking place, with others still under investigation.

Banks

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on his recent meetings with local banks.

(AQO 317/11-15)

Mr Wilson: My most recent meeting with the local banks was on 30th August which included representatives from the Ulster Bank, Bank of Ireland, First Trust, Northern Bank, Barclays, Santander and HSBC.

The primary purpose of the meeting was to discuss the implications of the current concerns in global financial markets around high levels of sovereign debt and slower than expected growth in major economies, particularly on local business confidence.

We also discussed the perceived lack of finance available for SMEs, the banks recent performance, and their progress in implementing the Business Finance Taskforce recommendations. In particular, I have been pressing for the implementation of an appeals panel for local businesses who feel they have been unreasonably denied access to credit and I hope to see progress on this in the near future.

I have also been liaising with the British Bankers Association to obtain regional data on bank lending in Northern Ireland which has now been provided. This reveals that new lending has decreased over the past three quarters which is clearly a concern.

Peace Funding

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what discussions he has had with the Minister for Finance in Dublin to secure a further tranche of European Union peace funding.

(AQO 318/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Discussions between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland on the possibility of a further round of EU PEACE funding have to date been primarily at official level. However, I have several times discussed the subject with the Republic's Minister of Finance, Michael Noonan. Naturally, a fourth EU-funded PEACE Programme is something our two administrations would welcome. However, we are at an early stage in the debate on future EU funding in general and all discussions thus far have necessarily been tentative.

Both Northern Ireland, and the Government of the Republic, have already advised the European Commission that we would favour a fourth PEACE Programme and the Commission has responded by saying that it would be highly supportive of such a proposal. But the Commission cannot itself take the initiative on PEACE IV Programme. It will have to be requested to do so by the relevant member states—the UK and the Republic of Ireland. We are therefore working at official and Ministerial level to influence the wider UK position on future EU Cohesion policy in order to ensure that this includes provision for a further PEACE Programme. Minister Noonan has advised me that the Republic's Government is doing the same.

Business Rates

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether his Department has had any discussions with, or has received representations from, retail traders located in Belfast or on the main arterial routes, in relation to Rate Relief initiatives to help combat the economic recession and the repercussions of shop closures.

(AQO 319/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Over the summer months my officials and I have met a wide range of representatives from the retail trade, individuals and groups, about the proposals to rebalance the business rates system and on other related issues. Meetings have taken place with the Federation of Small Businesses, the CBI, the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium, the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce, Asda, Sainsbury's and the NI Independent Retail Traders Association.

Ministers' doors are open to all who wish to look at practicable ways in which we, as an Executive and Assembly, can improve the very difficult business environment that exists at present. We cannot work miracles and immunise the business community from the effects of this prolonged recession. We do listen however and in terms of what I can do, my Department is nearing the end of a consultation on doubling rate relief to bring in more small businesses, funded by a levy of the largest shops and allowing window displays to be used in empty shops without triggering full rates. If these proposals find favour with the business community I will be asking the Assembly to help me get the required legislation in place for next year.

Damages (Asbestos-related Conditions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when the Damages (Asbestos-related Conditions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 will come into operation.

(AQO 321/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The commencement of the Damages (Asbestos-related Conditions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 will be further considered when the outcome of the appeal in relation to the corresponding legislation in Scotland is known. The UK Supreme Court heard the appeal from 13-15 June 2011 and it is hoped that the Court's judgment will be handed down in October.

Green New Deal

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether his Department has assessed the viability of the Green New Deal.

(AQO 322/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Department for Social Development has lead responsibility for taking forward the Green New Deal; and I understand that a business case is currently being prepared to take forward the initiative. The business case has not yet been received by my Department.

Special Advisers

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, given the constraints on public sector pay, why he decided on 18 July 2011, to increase the upper salary limit for Band B Special Advisers to £90,000.

(AQO 323/11-15)

Mr Wilson: As the Minister with responsibility for pay matters in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, I took the decision to increase the upper limit of the Special Advisers' pay band B from £82,531 to £90,000 in recognition of the requirement to set pay bands at a level that will ensure that individuals with the requisite skills and abilities are attracted to and retained in these key posts.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Locum Appointment for Service

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of employing a junior doctor in the post of Locum Appointment for Service compared to Locum Appointment for Training, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1647/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The cost of employing junior doctors in Locum Appointment for Service (LAS) and Locum Appointment for Training (LAT) posts is determined by individual HSC Trusts, taking into account the individual appointee's competencies and experience, the level of work the appointee will be expected to undertake and the length of time they are likely to be in post. LAS based appointments will normally be paid using a short term locum scale which ranges from £548.13 to £883.20 per week, whilst LAT salaries will be placed on a longer term scale which ranges from £29,705 to £39,300 per annum. The range of different scales to be applied is clearly set out in a pay circular issued annually by the Department.

HSC Trusts have advised that it is not possible to extract this information from their payroll system without incurring disproportionate costs.

Healthcare: Provision

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much each Health and Social Care Trust has paid to the private sector in the Republic of Ireland and in other parts of the UK for the provision of healthcare in Northern Ireland in each of the last three financial years.

(AQW 1657/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate costs.

Family Planning Association

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 1547/11-15, given the Family Planning Association's 2009 Annual Report which stated "Our job is to give support and information to help them (mothers) decide whether to continue with the pregnancy, have an abortion or choose adoption" and its on-going Time For Change campaign on abortion law (i) for his assessment of the use of the funding provided to the Family Planning Association; and (ii) whether he can offer an assurance that this funding is not used to advocate abortion.

(AQW 1714/11-15)

Mr Poots: The use of my Department's funding to the Family Planning Association towards its central administrative costs has been satisfactorily assessed against the procedures in place for the provision of Departmental funding, including how the organisation's services contribute towards meeting the aim and objectives of the Sexual Health Promotion Strategy and Action Plan. None of the funding provided by the Department is used to advocate abortion.

Rainbow Project

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how much of the departmental funding allocated to the Rainbow Project is being spent on lobbying for an expansion of gay rights; (ii) for his assessment of the appropriateness of this expenditure; (iii) how much departmental funding is spent on staffing for the Rainbow project; (iv) whether his Department places restrictions on the activities of the staff employed through this funding; and (v) whether his Department places any other restrictions on the use of departmental funding by the Rainbow Project.

(AQW 1755/11-15)

Mr Poots: None of the funding allocated by my Department towards the central administrative costs of the Rainbow Project is spent on lobbying for an expansion of gay rights. Funding of £32,443 in 2011/12 has been made available, which the Rainbow Project uses as a contribution towards salary costs of the Director's post. The funding is awarded for the purpose of achieving objectives in support of Departmental policy in relation to sexual health promotion and HIV prevention. My Department monitors the funding against an agreed schedule of activities. Standard terms and conditions applicable to all grants awarded by my Department also apply.

Waiting Times for Cataract Surgery

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current waiting times for cataract surgery in each Health and Social Care Trust; and whether patients have been given specific timelines for these operations only to have them extended.

(AQW 1767/11-15)

Mr Poots: The number of patients waiting for cataract surgery in each Health and Social Care Trust, and the length of time they were waiting at 30th June 2011, the most recent quarter for which official statistics are available, is outlined in the table below.

NUMBER OF PATIENTS WAITING FOR CATARACT SURGERY, BY LENGTH OF TIME WAITING, AT EACH HSC TRUST: POSITION AT 30TH JUNE 2011

HSC Trust	Waiting time (in weeks)						Total Waiting
	0-6	>6-13	>13-21	>21-26	>26-36	>36	
Belfast	635	774	713	50	2	0	2,174
Northern	13	19	9	0	0	0	41
South Eastern	158	167	38	0	0	0	363
Southern	57	44	9	0	0	0	110
Western	238	191	79	4	0	0	512
Total Northern Ireland	1,101	1,195	848	54	2	0	3,200

Source: DHSSPS Inpatient Waiting Time Dataset

Patients joining the waiting list are advised of the current waiting time and are given an indicative month when they can expect their surgery to be carried out.

Children From the Travelling Community

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether there is any Social Services intervention for children from the travelling community whose parents are subject to or have been subject to court proceedings for domestic violence, and whether is it possible for these children to be placed on the At Risk register.

(AQW 1799/11-15)

Mr Poots: All children in Northern Ireland who are deemed to be at risk of abuse, regardless of their family, community or ethnic background, may be added to the Child Protection Register. Social Services will assess the risk to the child or children involved in accordance with established child protection policy and procedure.

Dementia

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given that 22,000 people have dementia and that this figure is expected to rise to 47,000 by 2051 (i) what are the minimum standards of training provided for those who work with patients with dementia and (ii) what qualifications are required for healthcare staff to work in the care of older people with dementia.

(AQW 1855/11-15)

Mr Poots: Dementia as a condition is included within all undergraduate healthcare professional training programmes. While there are no minimum standards of training or specific qualifications required for those working in dementia care, employers ensure that staff are trained appropriately for their role. Post graduate training is provided for those specialising in this area.

Antrim Area Hospital's MRI Suite

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the weekly working hours of the Antrim Area Hospital's MRI Suite in (i) 2008; (ii) 2009; and (iii) 2010.

(AQW 1862/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust reported that the Antrim Area Hospital's MRI Suite was in operation 35 hours per week in 2008, 2009 and 2010.

Causeway Hospital's and Antrim Area Hospital's CT Scanners

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the weekly working hours of the (i) Causeway Hospital's; and (ii) Antrim Area Hospital's CT scanners in (a) 2008; (b) 2009; and (c) 2010.

(AQW 1864/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust reported that Causeway Hospital's CT scanner was in operation 35 hours per week in 2008, 2009 and 2010. The Antrim Area Hospital's CT scanner was in operation 35 hours per week in 2008, but this was increased to 49 hours per week in 2009 and 2010.

These CT scanners are used to provide a 24-hour / 365-day emergency out-of-hours service.

A second CT scanner for Antrim Area Hospital was commissioned in April 2011 providing an additional 35 hours scanning capacity per week.

MRI Scans: Causeway Hospital and Antrim Area Hospital

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many patient trips for MRI scans were undertaken by ambulances from the Causeway Hospital to the Antrim Area Hospital; (ii) what was the average (a) time taken (b) number of ambulance waits; and (c) cost for such trips in (iii) 2008; (iv) 2009; and (v) 2010.

(AQW 1869/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) During the last three years, 169 patient trips for MRI scans were made from Causeway Hospital to Antrim Area Hospital. Of which, 145 were undertaken by a Patient Care Service (PCS) vehicle (with No paramedic assistance) and 24 by an emergency response ambulance (A&E vehicle with paramedic assistance).

NUMBER OF PATIENT JOURNEYS FOR MRI SCANS BETWEEN CAUSEWAY AND ANTRIM AREA

Year	Number of Journeys
2008	51
2009	53
2010	65
Total	169

- (ii) (a) The time taken is not currently available for those trips made by PCS vehicles but is available for the 24 trips made by emergency response ambulances. The average time taken for these journeys refers to the time between the arrival of the ambulance at Causeway Hospital and the arrival at the Antrim Area Hospital. These are detailed for the last three years in the table overleaf.

AVERAGE LENGTH OF TIME TAKEN FOR JOURNEYS BY EMERGENCY RESPONSE AMBULANCES FOR MRI SCANS BETWEEN CAUSEWAY AND ANTRIM AREA HOSPITALS

Year	Average Time Taken (HH:MM:SS)
2008	01:24:50
2009	01:08:10
2010	01:18:41
Total	01:17:16

- (ii) (b) Information on the number of ambulance waits is not available. However, information is available on the average turnaround time for an ambulance at Antrim Area Hospital only, i.e. the average time between the arrival of the ambulance at Antrim Area and the time the patient is cleared from the ambulance at Antrim Area Hospital.

AVERAGE LENGTH OF TIME WAITED FOR AMBULANCE TO BE CLEARED AT ANTRIM AREA HOSPITAL

Year	Average Time of Ambulance Waits (HH:MM:SS)
2008	00:29:32
2009	00:13:54
2010	00:22:38
Total	00:21:41

- (iii) (c) Information is not currently available on the total cost of these trips. However, information is available on the cost per hour for these trips for each type of vehicle.

2011/12	Costs/hour
A&E	£61.58
RRV	£37.31
ICV	£43.52

Melanoma: Waiting List

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people with melanoma are on the waiting list for day surgery.

(AQW 1871/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on waiting times for cancer treatment is measured on the basis of how long patients waited for their cancer treatment, rather than how long they are currently waiting.

During the month of June 2011, the most recent month for which my Department holds provisional information, 15 patients were treated for a malignant melanoma at Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland. All of these patients were treated within 31 days of a decision to treat for cancer being taken.

The cancer waiting time information collected by my Department cannot identify the number of these patients that were treated for Stage 4 Melanoma.

Fire Fighters

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a breakdown of fire fighters by (i) gender; (ii) age; and (iii) nationality.

(AQW 1879/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information in relation to Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service fire fighters is as follows:

GENDER

Male	Female	Total
1,852	47	1,899

BREAKDOWN OF STAFF BY AGE

16-25	41
26-35	407
36-45	763
46-55	614
55+	74
TOTAL	1,899

ETHNIC ORIGIN*

White European	Asian	Other
1,896 (99.8%)	2 (0.15%)	1 (0.05%)

(*The NIFRS has recently commenced monitoring its workforce and applicants by nationality; figures are, therefore, currently available only for ethnic origin.)

Volunteer Rescue Services

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what support is available to facilitate volunteer rescue services reaching the scene of an accident in an emergency.

(AQW 1881/11-15)

Mr Poots: The responsibility for coordinating or supporting the operational response of volunteer rescue organisations in the event of an emergency does not fall to my Department or to any of its agencies.

Myalgic Encephalomyelitis

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of patients with Myalgic Encephalomyelitis; and (ii) what treatment is available for them.

(AQW 1882/11-15)

Mr Poots: Details of the number of patients with Myalgic Encephalomyelitis is not available however the table below provides provisional details for 2010/11 on the number of people who have been admitted to hospital admission with ME by individual Trust area:

HSC Trusts	Admissions
Belfast HSC Trust	54

HSC Trusts	Admissions
South Eastern HSC Trust	30
Northern HSC Trust	4
Southern HSC Trust	24
Western HSC Trust	7
Total	119¹

1. N.B. It should be noted that any individual could have been admitted to hospital more than once during any given time period and would therefore be counted more than once in the above figures

Treatment for those people living with ME is, for the most part, provided by general practitioners; however, patients (both adults and children) have access to a wide range of care and support services in primary, secondary and community settings, including specialist medical, paediatric, neurology and mental health services.

Prison Hospital Treatment

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of prisoners who have (i) received prison hospital treatment; and (ii) been admitted to prison hospital in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1884/11-15)

Mr Poots: There is no prison hospital in Northern Ireland. The healthcare centres in the 3 prison establishments, are primary care facilities that provide a range of services equivalent to those available from a Trust primary care facility in the community. While HMP Maghaberry and Hydebank Wood have the ability to accommodate prisoners within the healthcare centres for treatment and assessment, they are not hospital facilities. Any prisoner who requires inpatient hospital treatment or assessment would receive this in a Trust hospital.

The number of prisoners who have been admitted to a prison healthcare centre is detailed in the table below:

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Prisoners who have been admitted to a prison healthcare centre	324	238	190	179	178

The healthcare centre in HMP Magilligan ceased accommodating prisoners in 2008.

The information on the total number of treatments for the last five years is not held centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Prisoners: Hospital Treatment

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of prisoners who have (i) received hospital treatment in a hospital outside prison; and (ii) been admitted to a hospital outside prison in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1885/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information is set out in the table below:

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Prisoners who have received hospital treatment in a hospital outside prison	657	774	783	742	578
Prisoners who have been admitted to a hospital outside prison	84	72	100	72	57

Prisoners: Hospital Treatment

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many prisoners required (i) hospital treatment; and (ii) hospital admission as a result of violence in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1886/11-15)

Mr Poots: I understand that neither the NI Prison Service nor the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust hold the information requested centrally and that it could only be produced manually from individual records at disproportionate cost.

Prisoners: Hospital Stays

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the ten longest hospital stays by prisoners in each of the last five years; and the reasons for them.

(AQW 1887/11-15)

Mr Poots: The answer to this question is set out in the table below:

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Length of stay(hours).	486.81	407.72	798.74	1637.23	725.21
	358.25	394.84	698	1148.78	205.72
	322	366.67	592.94	528.05	186.47
	271.9	362.77	484.52	370.39	171.2
	249.08	334	389.45	338.97	168.5
	242.95	296.72	295	316	147.9
	240.3	268.17	266.9	280.8	103.15
	238.36	263.25	253.16	238.92	91.4
	215.48	253.84	232.53	212.98	78.92
	197	247.5	222.56	196.45	68.03

The individual reasons for these stays in hospital are not held centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost. In addition there would be potential issues of patient confidentiality in the provision of this information.

Prisoners: Hospital Stays

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average or approximate cost of keeping a prisoner for one night in (i) a prison hospital; and (ii) a hospital outside prison.

(AQW 1888/11-15)

Mr Poots: There is no prison hospital in Northern Ireland. The healthcare centres in the 3 prison establishments, are primary care facilities that provide a range of services equivalent to those available from a Trust primary care facility in the community. While HMP Maghaberry and Hydebank Wood have the ability to accommodate prisoners within the healthcare centres for treatment and assessment, they are not hospital facilities. Any prisoner who requires inpatient hospital treatment or assessment would receive this in a Trust hospital.

The cost of keeping a prisoner in a prison healthcare centre for one day, based on the overall cost per prisoner place, is approximately £202.

The average cost of keeping a prisoner in a HSC hospital facility is estimated at between £610 and £1049 per day. This is based upon the average bed day cost for all patients and the additional costs required to escort and securely transport the prisoner to the hospital.

Welfare Reform

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans his Department has to assess the impact of Welfare Reform on health and social services.

(AQW 1916/11-15)

Mr Poots: My officials are liaising with their counterparts in the Department for Social Development to identify issues for health and social care services arising from Welfare Reform. As Welfare Reform progresses my Department will consider the potential implications emerging and how they may be addressed, working with the Department for Social Development.

Self-medication in Hospitals

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) on how many occasions in each of the last three years have patients in hospitals been permitted to self-medicate; and (ii) to detail the policy on self-medication in hospitals.

(AQW 1917/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) There is no information available relating to the number of occasions when patients in hospitals were permitted to self medicate during each of the past three years.
- (ii) There is no regional policy on self medication in hospitals. The circumstances in which self administration by patients is permitted are described in individual Trusts' medicines policies, medicines management codes or guidelines. These vary by Trust and detail the situations when patients may self administer their medicines in certain therapeutic areas where this is judged to be clinically safe.

Welfare Reform

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions he had with the Minister for Social Development in relation to the implementation of Welfare Reform and its impact on people living with long-term health conditions.

(AQW 1919/11-15)

Mr Poots: I have met with the Minister for Social Development on a number of occasions to discuss a variety of issues, though to date we have not specifically discussed Welfare Reform. My officials are liaising with their counterparts in the Department for Social Development to identify issues for health and social care arising from the implementation of Welfare Reform. I will meet with my colleague, the Social Development Minister, to discuss the position as and when it is necessary to do so.

Obesity

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many people are classed as obese; and (ii) what actions his Department is taking to address this problem.

(AQW 1921/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) The 2005/06 Health & Social Wellbeing Survey reported that overall 24% of adults were obese. A similar proportion of men (25%) and women (23%) were identified as having a BMI of 30 or over and therefore classified as obese.

The HSWB Survey 2005/06 also collected height and weight measurements for children aged 2-15 years. This survey indicated that using the International Approach 8% of these children were recorded as obese (8% of boys and 7% of girls).

The results from the 2010/11 Health Survey are expected to be released next month.

- (ii) My Department has led the development of a Framework for Preventing and Addressing Overweight and Obesity in Northern Ireland 2011-2021: A Fitter Future for All.

This Framework will incorporate and oversee the existing Fit Futures Implementation Plan which had a focus on children and young people and widen the scope to contain outcomes regarding food and nutrition, and physical activity throughout the life course of the population. It is anticipated that this Framework will be issued for final Ministerial and Executive approval in the autumn of 2011.

The successful implementation of the Framework will rely on close collaboration with DE, DCAL and other Departments. SportNI, through its Sports Matter Strategy, will also be a key delivery partner for many of the outcomes relating to increasing participation in physical activity.

The Public Health Agency currently undertakes a range of programmes and initiatives to address overweight and obesity across Northern Ireland, working in collaboration with other Departments and their agencies. Work in this area includes the following:

- Working to ensure that healthy weight and reducing obesity forms part of local action plans.
- Working with DE to support the development and implementation of the Food in School Policy; and
- Support enhanced opportunities for all age groups and abilities to be physically active, including collaborative work to build/enhance the infrastructure that supports activity in various settings.

Children: At-risk Register

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the average number of home visits in each of the last three years to children on the At-risk Register or others who are subject to social services intervention; and (ii) of these, how many were unannounced.

(AQW 1939/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is not available either centrally from the DHSSPS or from the HSC Board, and HSC Trusts could only produce these figures at disproportionate cost.

Preventative Social Care Strategy

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of whether the introduction of a preventative social care strategy would generate large savings for his Department and provide a better standard of living for the growing elderly population.

(AQW 1953/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department has developed a range of strategies to promote better health and wellbeing. These strategies aim to encourage healthier choices in a range of areas including mental health promotion, smoking, physical activity, food & nutrition, alcohol & drugs, home accident prevention, and sexual health,— all of which can lead to long term better health for the Northern Ireland population. In addition, the public health strategy Investing for Health promotes collaboration across government departments to address the wider social determinants of health.

Successful implementation of these strategies will contribute to a reduction in the numbers of people, particularly in later life, requiring hospital and community treatment for preventable chronic illness and mental ill health.

It is recognized that the potential cost savings to our integrated Health and Social Care sector of effective preventative action is significant. A wide range of social care services are also available to help support and maintain people in their own homes, independently for as long as possible which can meet their care preferences and represent a cost effective form of provision.

Melanoma: Waiting Times

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people with Stage 4 Melanoma are waiting to be admitted to hospital for surgery.

(AQW 1955/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on waiting times for cancer treatment is measured on the basis of how long patients waited for their cancer treatment, rather than how long they are currently waiting.

During the month of June 2011, the most recent month for which my Department holds provisional information, 15 patients were treated for a malignant melanoma at Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland. All of these patients were treated within 31 days of a decision to treat for cancer being taken.

The cancer waiting time information collected by my Department cannot identify the number of these patients that were treated for Stage 4 Melanoma.

Mid-Ulster Hospital

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) whether any internal structural changes have been made to the Mid-Ulster Hospital in the last 12 months; (ii) whether he has any plans to change the internal structure of the hospital in the next 12 months; and (iii) why this information was not provided in his response dated 6 September 2011.

(AQW 2020/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) Minor works were carried out earlier this year to erect partition walls in a vacated ward in the Mid-Ulster hospital. This was part of a scheme to provide new dental accommodation for a NHS dental service in the Mid-Ulster area. The work was completed in February 2011.
- (ii) The Northern Trust is in the process of developing proposals to refurbish elements of the Mid-Ulster Hospital which may or may not be inclusive of structural changes. These proposals are at a very early stage fuller detail will be available from the Trust in due course.
- (iii) My previous response of 6 September 2011 advised contacting the Trust regarding the detail of their plans.

Pharmacy Closures

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether an Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out on the consequences of potential pharmacy closures on patient services.

(AQW 2027/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am committed and indeed required by law to provide a fair and reasonable system of remuneration to community pharmacists in Northern Ireland. There is no indication to date of any pharmacy closing as a result of the new remuneration and reimbursement arrangements put in place for community pharmacies.

I do not accept the assertions that are being made by Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland (CPNI). However, in light of the judicial review of the new remuneration arrangements successfully sought by CPNI, which was scheduled to be heard on 20 and 21 September, it would be inappropriate for me to comment further until the outcome of the hearing is known.

Pharmacy Closures

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any strategy that will be put in place to manage the pharmacy closures that are expected as a result of the proposed cuts to the community pharmacy budget, so that the needs of vulnerable patients will be protected.

(AQW 2028/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am committed and indeed required by law to provide a fair and reasonable system of remuneration to community pharmacists in Northern Ireland. There is no indication to date of any pharmacy closing as a result of the new remuneration and reimbursement arrangements put in place for community pharmacies.

I do not accept the assertions that are being made by Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland (CPNI). However, in light of the judicial review of the new remuneration arrangements successfully sought by CPNI, which was scheduled to be heard on 20 and 21 September, it would be inappropriate for me to comment further until the outcome of the hearing is known.

Pharmacy Closures

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the risk to pharmacy services in rural areas as a result of the proposed cuts to the community pharmacy budget.

(AQW 2029/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am committed and indeed required by law to provide a fair and reasonable system of remuneration to community pharmacists in Northern Ireland. There is no indication to date of any pharmacy closing as a result of the new remuneration and reimbursement arrangements put in place for community pharmacies.

I do not accept the assertions that are being made by Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland (CPNI). However, in light of the judicial review of the new remuneration arrangements successfully sought by CPNI, which was scheduled to be heard on 20 and 21 September, it would be inappropriate for me to comment further until the outcome of the hearing is known.

Pharmacies: Job Losses

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an estimate of the number of potential job losses in community pharmacies as a result of the proposed cuts to the community pharmacy budget.

(AQW 2030/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am committed and indeed required by law to provide a fair and reasonable system of remuneration to community pharmacists in Northern Ireland. There is no indication to date of any pharmacy closing as a result of the new remuneration and reimbursement arrangements put in place for community pharmacies.

I do not accept the assertions that are being made by Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland (CPNI). However, in light of the judicial review of the new remuneration arrangements successfully sought by

CPNI, which was scheduled to be heard on 20 and 21 September, it would be inappropriate for me to comment further until the outcome of the hearing is known.

Pharmacies

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many pharmacies currently help patients manage their medication through the provision of a weekly medicines compliance tray and a monitored dosage system.

(AQW 2031/11-15)

Mr Poots: The provision of medicines by community pharmacies in compliance trays or monitored dosage systems is not an HSC contracted service and information on the number of pharmacies providing this type of service is not collected by the Department.

Cancer: Portaferry

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many people in Portaferry are currently diagnosed with cancer; and (ii) whether this figure is significantly higher than other areas.

(AQW 2032/11-15)

Mr Poots: This information was supplied by the NI Cancer Registry which was established in 1994. Therefore information on people diagnosed with cancer prior to 1993 is not available.

From NI Cancer Registry data, there were 250 people living in the Portaferry ward who were diagnosed with cancer (excluding non-melanoma skin cancer) between 1993 and 2009 that were still alive at the end of 2009. This may represent an undercount of the actual number of people living with cancer as those diagnosed prior to 1993 are not included. In 2009 there were 16 new incidences.

Prevalence figures at ward level are not large enough to produce robust rates to allow meaningful comparison to be made, therefore only differences at LGD and Northern Ireland level were analysed.

The overall prevalence rate for all cancers (excluding non-melanoma skin cancer) in the Ards LGD area was not statistically higher than in other LGD's. In fact the prevalence rate was statistically lower than Belfast, Castlereagh, Larne, Lisburn and North Down LGD's as well as lower than the overall Northern Ireland rate in December 2009.

The information was provided by the Northern Ireland Cancer registry and is the most up to date available.

Cardio Angiograms: Waiting Times

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the current waiting time for patients to receive the results of cardio angiograms, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 2033/11-15)

Mr Poots: I have been advised by the Health and Social Care Board that the report outlining the results of a cardio angiogram is dictated and typed at the time of the procedure and the results discussed with the patient before they are discharged.

Patients are then discharged with a letter which they are to take to their GP. This outlines the results of the angiogram and identifies any further medication that may be required. This is followed up by a further letter sent from the Health and Social Care Trust to the patient's GP providing an in-depth explanation of the results.

Health and Social Care Trusts that perform this procedure have confirmed that they are all currently adhering to this process.

Suicide Prevention and Assistance

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures his Department has taken in relation to (i) suicide prevention; and (ii) providing assistance to families which have experienced suicide.

(AQW 2034/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) My Department currently invests £6.7m per annum for the provision of suicide prevention services, and I have ring-fenced this funding for 2011/12.

Specific measures progressed include:

- Community-led suicide prevention and bereavement support services such as counselling and training;
- Establishment of Lifeline 24/7 crisis response helpline;
- Provision of Independent Schools Counselling and peer support via Youth Services in the aftermath of a young person's death ;
- The Deliberate Self-Harm Registry which provides information to inform the delivery of accident and emergency services, and psychiatric follow up;
- Local research into suicide and self harm;
- Regional training on suicide awareness and mental health first aid;
- Enhanced mental health crisis intervention services;
- Public awareness campaigns;
- Media monitoring;
- Support to address alcohol/substance misuse.

As the causes of suicide are multifactorial, I am currently meeting with other Ministers to consider how best to progress relevant actions.

- (ii) Over £2m of the £6.7m funding is allocated for community support, which includes the provision of suicide bereavement support services. I am also meeting with local community/voluntary groups, which provide support for families bereaved by suicide, and all of this additional learning will feed into the refresh of Protect Life which is due for publication later this year.

HSSPS: Special Advisers

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether his Special Adviser is paid within Band A or Band B of the Department of Finance and Personnel's salary scale; and, if it is within Band B whether, in light of the DFP decision to increase the upper limit of the Band B scale to £90,000, there has been an increase in salary or an increase is planned.

(AQW 2039/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Special Adviser is paid within Band B of the Special Adviser salary scale.

There has been no increase in my Special Adviser's salary and no increased is planned in light of the increase to the Band B scale maximum.

Cancer Drugs Fund

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the Cancer Drugs Fund introduced in England, for his assessment of access to cancer treatments in Northern Ireland compared to England.

(AQW 2044/11-15)

Mr Poots: Cancer prevention, early intervention and access to appropriate effective treatment continues to be our biggest challenge and they remain a high priority for my Department.

Whilst around £22m recurrently is spent on a range of cancer medicines here, I acknowledge that further improvement in the availability of NICE approved medicines applicable to Northern Ireland is required.

In Northern Ireland the Drugs and Therapeutics Committee, led by the NI Cancer Network, has a regional process for the prioritisation of new drugs and therapies. The Committee includes clinical representation from both oncology and haematology and offers clear advice and guidance to the Health and Social Care Board on priorities for the commissioning of cancer drugs. A new revised process to speed up applicability of NICE approved drugs in NI will be effective from 28 September 2011.

In addition, I am currently exploring other options to increase resources available to fund access to specialist medicines.

Social Services Staff: Entry to Houses

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what procedures are followed when Social Services staff are refused entry to a house where care proceedings are in place or pending, or when there is reasonable cause to suspect some form of abuse or neglect of persons. **(AQW 2057/11-15)**

Mr Poots: When Social Services staff are refused entry to a house where care proceedings are in place in respect of a child believed to be 'harboured' in that house Social Services can, under the provisions of Article 69 of the Children(Northern Ireland) Order 1995 make application to the Court for a Recovery Order in respect of that child.

If there is an immediate concern in relation to the welfare of the child Social Services can enlist the assistance of the PSNI who, under their own powers and duties, can enter the premises, search for and retrieve the child.

When Social Services staff are refused entry to a house where care proceedings are pending in respect of a child, Social Services can apply to the Court for an Emergency Protection Order in respect of that child and any other child in the household that may be at risk of harm. If there is an immediate concern in relation to the welfare of the child Social Services can enlist the assistance of the PSNI who, under their own powers and duties, can enter the premises, search for and retrieve the child.

When Social Services staff are refused entry to a house when there is reasonable cause to suspect some form of abuse or neglect of a child Social Services can apply for a range of legal orders that enable them to fulfill their duties to investigate under Article 66 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. In instance where it is believed that there is an immediate risk to the welfare of a child, Social Services can make application to the Court for an Emergency Protection Order and can also enlist the assistance of the PSNI to search for and remove the child.

Nurses Specialising in Parkinson's Disease

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of nurses specialising in Parkinson's Disease in each Health and Social Care Trust area. **(AQW 2059/11-15)**

Mr Poots: The information requested is provided in the table below.

Nurses specialising in Parkinson's Disease employed within Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Trusts at September 2011

Trust	Headcount	WTE
Belfast	2	1.80

Trust	Headcount	WTE
Northern	1	1.00
South Eastern	0	0.00
Southern	1	1.00
Western	2	2.00
Total	6	5.80

Source: Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Trusts

Notes:

1. WTE = Whole-time Equivalent.
2. The 2 (1.80 WTE) staff based at Belfast Trust also cover the South Eastern Trust area and parts of the Northern Trust area.

Parkinson's Disease or Diabetes

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether, since coming to office, he has given any consideration to the daily timing of medication to patients in hospital with conditions such as Parkinson's Disease or Diabetes.

(AQW 2060/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is important that patients in hospital receive their medication on time and Trusts are responsible for ensuring that there are Medicines Management Policies in place to support this. There is currently no regional policy on this subject.

Sleep Disorders

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) what provisions are in place to treat patients with sleep disorders other than sleep apnoea; and (ii) whether polysomnographs can be administered.

(AQW 2083/11-15)

Mr Poots: Individuals with sleep disorders may be managed by neurologists or by GPs depending on the severity of their condition.

Polysomnography tests for sleep related breathing problems and a wide range of sleep disorders are provided by the Neurophysiology Department at the Mater Hospital.

Hospital Referral: Waiting Times

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of people on the waiting list for a referral to a Neurologist at the Royal Victoria Hospital; (ii) the waiting time for referrals for the Rheumatology Department at Belfast City Hospital; and (iii) what action his Department is taking to reduce these waiting times.

(AQW 2084/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust have advised me that, at 19th September 2011, there were 2,333 people on the waiting list for a first outpatient appointment in the Neurology specialty at the Royal Victoria Hospital.

The waiting time position for a first outpatient appointment in the Rheumatology specialty at Belfast City Hospital, at 19th September 2011, is outlined in the table below.

Specialty	Patients Waiting for a First Outpatient Appointment at Belfast City Hospital, by Weeks Waiting						Total Waiting
	0-6	>6-9	>9-13	>13-21	>21-26	>26	
Rheumatology	358	178	164	331	232	792	2,055

Source: Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

The Commissioning Plan Direction (Northern Ireland) 2011, issued by my Department in June 2011, contains targets which identify that, from April 2011; at least 50% of patients should wait no longer than nine weeks for a first outpatient appointment and all patients should be seen for a first outpatient appointment within 21 weeks. The Health and Social Care Board is currently working with all HSC Trusts to address the issue of waiting times.

Elderly Carers: Support

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action his Department is taking to provide extra support for elderly carers.

(AQW 2087/11-15)

Mr Poots: Carers, including elderly carers, are individuals with their own needs and need real choices based on their individual circumstances. Research shows that older carers are more likely to provide higher levels of physical and personal care and are more likely to experience social isolation and encounter difficulties maintaining their own health and wellbeing.

A carer's assessment is the gateway to accessing support services. The Department has introduced a regional "Carer's Support and Needs Assessment" tool which facilitates the assessment of each carer and provides them with the opportunity to discuss their own specific needs and allows Trusts to identify any support services that they may require. It is important that the needs of individual carers are properly understood and that service providers respond with flexibility, offering carers real choice as to how their needs will be met.

In response to assessment a range of supports can be put in place, including the provision of information and advice, putting carers in touch with support organisations and other carers, or more traditional support such as domiciliary care services or respite.

Royal Dental Hospital, Belfast

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of people on the waiting list; and (ii) the waiting list time for a referral to the Royal Dental Hospital, Belfast.

(AQW 2097/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust have advised me that, at 19th September 2011, there were 3,953 people on the waiting list for a first outpatient appointment in the Royal Dental Hospital
- (ii) The waiting time position for a first outpatient appointment in the Royal Dental Hospital is outlined in the table below:

Hospital	Patients Waiting for an Appointment, by Weeks Waiting						Total Waiting
	0-6	>6-9	>9-13	>13-21	>21-26	>26	
Royal Dental Hospital	936	282	365	697	362	1,311	3,953

Source: Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Royal Dental Hospital, Belfast

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number and grade of medical staff working at the Royal Dental Hospital, Belfast.

(AQW 2099/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is provided in the table below.

DENTAL STAFF EMPLOYED WITHIN THE ROYAL DENTAL HOSPITAL, BELFAST BY GRADE AT 21 SEPTEMBER 2011

Grade	Headcount	WTE
Consultants	14	7.14
Staff Grade	6	4.10
Specialist Registrar	4	4.00
Dental Foundation Officer 2	8	8.00
Dental Practitioners	9	1.15
Total	41	24.39

Source: Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Notes:

- WTE = Whole-time Equivalent.
- 8 (4.00 WTE) of the Consultants above hold joint contracts with Queens University, Belfast and 2 (0.30 WTE) run Ulster Hospital, Dundonald outreach clinics within the Royal Dental Hospital.
- In addition to the Consultants above, there are also 4 (3.30 WTE) Locum Consultants employed within the Dental Hospital, although one (1.00 WTE) of these Locums is due to leave at the end of September 2011.

Supplier Invoices

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many supplier invoices have been paid late by (i) Health and Social Care Trusts; and (ii) Health and Social Care Board since 1 April 2011.

(AQW 2122/11-15)

Mr Poots: The following table shows how many invoices have been paid late from 1 April 2011 to 31 July 2011, together with details of what percentage these represented of total invoices received.

INVOICES PAID LATE – 1 APRIL 2011 TO 31 JULY 2011(A)

	Cumulative total invoices paid late	% of total invoices received
Belfast HSC Trust	8,063	6.6%
Northern HSC Trust	2,304	5.5%
Southern HSC Trust	4,024	11.2%
S/E HSC Trust	3,835	9.3%
Western Trust	1,254	3.8%
NI Ambulance Service HSC Trust	184	3.6%
HSC Board	875	14.6%

Note (A): Latest available information.

Hospitals: Staffing

Ms Ruane asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to ensure that hospitals, such as the Downe Hospital, Downpatrick and Daisy Hill Hospital, Newry, have a full complement of trained and specialist staff.

(AQO 327/11-15)

Mr Poots: The recruitment of appropriately trained and specialist hospital staff is a matter for the relevant Trust, in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency (NIMDTA) with regard to doctors-in-training. To achieve the complement of staff required to provide safe, effective and sustainable services, Trusts may use bank, agency or locum staff to fill short or long term vacancies.

At strategic level, my Department regularly reviews workforce requirements in order to plan for the future, and there is an annual significant investment in the postgraduate education and training of HSC staff.

Where there will be anticipated vacancies, appropriate action is instigated, for example in the junior doctor medical workforce, I have asked the NIMDTA to maximise recruitment in certain specialties and I am addressing one of the barriers to international recruitment, the immigration rules, with the Borders Agency.

Multiple System Atrophy

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what respite services are available for people with Multiple System Atrophy and their carers.

(AQW 2187/11-15)

Mr Poots: Respite services are provided by Health and Social Care Trusts commensurate with an individual's assessed needs, rather than solely according to their disability or condition. On this basis, people with Multiple System Atrophy and their carers can benefit from respite care, which can take many different forms, such as local flexible short term arrangements or, if appropriate, a stay in an alternative setting, including day facilities or a residential care home.

Looked After Children

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many looked after children have gone on to attend university in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2190/11-15)

Mr Poots: Figures are not available in the format requested either centrally from the DHSSPS or from the HSC Board, and HSC Trusts could only produce these figures at disproportionate cost.

The only figures similar to those requested and available centrally relates to former care leavers known to be in higher education on or at the time of their nineteenth birthday. For the five years for which data have been collected, of 928 former care leavers aged nineteen, just below three per cent (26) were known to have gone on to higher education.

The latest release of National Statistics bulletin, 'Care Leavers aged 19 in Northern Ireland 2009/10', is available on the DHSSPS website at:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib/statistics_and_research-cib-pub/children_statistics/stats_and_research_cib_care_leavers_aged19.htm

MRI Scans

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many MRI scans were carried out by the South Eastern; (ii) Southern; (iii) Western; and (iv) Belfast Health and Social Care Trusts in (a) 2008; (b) 2009; and (c) 2010.

(AQW 2222/11-15)

Mr Poots: The number of MRI scans carried out at the South Eastern; (ii) Southern; (iii) Western; and (iv) Belfast Health and Social Care Trusts in (a) 2008; (b) 2009; and (c) 2010 is outlined in the table below.

Health and Social Care Trust	Year		
	2008	2009	2010
South Eastern	4,956	5,200	5,783
Southern ¹	5,814	7,081	6,694
Western	6,049	6,771	6,964
Belfast	21,711	24,798	25,182

Source: Health and Social Care Trusts

1 Data relate to financial years 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11.

Patient Numbers: Whiteabbey Hospital and Antrim Area Hospital

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the change in patient numbers attending (i) Whiteabbey Hospital; and (ii) Antrim Area Hospital as a result of the closure of the Accident and Emergency Unit at Whiteabbey Hospital.

(AQW 2237/11-15)

Mr Poots: Emergency care services were reconfigured at both Whiteabbey and Mid Ulster emergency care departments on 24th May 2010, from consultant-led treatment services (Type 2 - emergency care departments) to nurse-led minor injury units with designated accommodation for the reception of patients with minor injuries and/or illnesses (Type 3 - emergency care departments). In addition, opening hours at both departments were reduced to 9am to 5pm, 5 days a week.

Information on the total number of new and unplanned review attendances each month at (i) Whiteabbey and (ii) Antrim Area emergency care departments is presented in the table overleaf.

MONTHLY ATTENDANCES AT WHITEABBEY AND ANTRIM AREA EMERGENCY CARE DEPARTMENTS (DECEMBER 2009 – MARCH 2011)

Emergency Care Dept.	Antrim	Change from previous Month	Whiteabbey	Change from previous Month	Northern HSC Trust	Change from previous Month
December 2009	5,495	-	1,402	-	11,421	-
January 2010	5,428	-67	1,450	48	11,354	-67
February 2010	4,869	-559	1,375	-75	10,373	-981
March 2010	5,802	933	1,589	214	12,308	1935
April 2010	5,554	-248	1,651	62	12,374	66
May 2010 ¹	6,052	498	1,256	-395	12,334	-40
June 2010	6,228	176	743	-513	11,405	-929
July 2010	6,185	-43	591	-152	11,333	-72
August 2010	6,167	-18	676	85	11,448	115
September 2010	6,104	-63	773	97	11,043	-405

Emergency Care Dept.	Antrim	Change from previous Month	Whiteabbey	Change from previous Month	Northern HSC Trust	Change from previous Month
October 2010	6,160	56	707	-66	10,960	-83
November 2010	5,596	-564	677	-30	10,048	-912
December 2010	5,541	-55	615	-62	9,708	-340
January 2011	5,873	332	687	72	10,405	697
February 2011	5,273	-600	629	-58	9,653	-752
March 2011	6,169	896	855	226	11,333	1680

1 Emergency Care Services at Whiteabbey were reconfigured on 24 May 2010.

Blood Donation: Homosexual and Bisexual Men

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he will consider lifting the ban on homosexual and bi-sexual men donating blood.

(AQO 331/11-15)

Mr Poots: I take the view that the current position in Northern Ireland should not be altered.

The Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs (SaBTO) has confirmed that the risk of HIV infection would, although by a small margin, increase as a result of a relaxation in the present lifetime deferral.

Safety must be my primary concern and I want to ensure the maximum public confidence.

Developing Better Services

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the Developing Better Services strategy for hospitals remains the overarching strategy for his Department.

(AQO 332/11-15)

Mr Poots: Developing Better Services was about modernising hospitals and reforming structures. This document was published for consultation in 2002 by Bairbre de Brun - then Minister for Health. It is, therefore, nine years old and there are different ways of working now. That is why I have asked the Chief Executive of the Health and Social Care Board Mr John Compton to carry out a review of health and social care services. This Review is due to report in November 2011 and will replace the Developing Better Services document.

It is my intention to look at all issues which impact on the provision of treatment and care for the population of Northern Ireland. My focus will be on improvement in health outcomes, and the safety, quality and effectiveness of services.

Maternity Services

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to enhance maternity services.

(AQO 333/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department recently carried out a review of maternity services policy and has, as a result, developed a draft maternity strategy which will shape the future provision of maternity services. The Review considered the provision of services for women at each stage of their pregnancy, pre-conception, antenatal, delivery and postnatal care. I plan to launch the draft strategy, for 12 weeks public consultation, in the next few weeks.

Mental Health: Rural Communities

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how he intends to increase further awareness of mental health issues amongst rural communities.

(AQO 335/11-15)

Mr Poots: In keeping with the Mental Health Promotion Strategy and the Suicide Prevention Strategy, initiatives have been implemented to promote mental health and wellbeing amongst the general population and amongst the rural community. The PHA will continue to support awareness raising aimed at rural communities.

The Agency is currently developing the next phase of the mental health promotion/suicide prevention public information campaign entitled "Signs and Symptoms" for launch in late 2011. The new campaign will encourage the early identification of mental health problems and will address the stigma that, unfortunately, can still be associated with mental ill health.

The new Mental Health and Wellbeing Promotion Strategy, currently being developed, will retain enhanced public awareness of mental health as a key outcome.

Hospitals: Omagh

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the range of hospital and GP services in the recently announced proposals for a new hospital in Omagh.

(AQO 336/11-15)

Mr Poots: The local hospital complex will provide a wide range of services for the local population. The enhanced local hospital will include an urgent care and treatment centre, intermediate care and palliative care services, a cardiac assessment unit, day surgery unit, imaging and diagnostic services, outpatient services, children's centre, women's health unit, renal services together with a range of support services including sterile supplies department and pathology services. There will also be a Health and Care Centre which will include GP accommodation.

Health and Social Care

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions he has had with the Minister of Finance and Personnel about financial priorities for health and social care provision.

(AQO 337/11-15)

Mr Poots: I met with the Minister of Finance and Personnel in July to discuss capital funding for my Department. I have also had several discussions with the First Minister on the financial issues facing my Department at which Minister of Finance and Personnel was also present.

Group B Streptococcus

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he intends to take proactive steps to raise awareness of Group B Streptococcus and introduce routine screening of pregnant women to help protect the unborn child.

(AQO 338/11-15)

Mr Poots: On 6 September I met a number of families who have been affected by group B streptococcus (GBS).

Following that meeting my Department has taken a number of steps to increase awareness of GBS, both among healthcare professionals and the public.

The Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Nursing Officer have written to healthcare professionals to highlight the clinical management of GBS in pregnancy in order to ensure that those who are at risk are managed appropriately and to ensure all pregnant women are aware of this infection.

The Chief Medical Officer has asked the Public Health Agency to take forward work to raise awareness of GBS in pregnancy and to ensure that The Pregnancy Book is updated to accurately reflect Departmental policy on GBS infection.

The Chief Nursing Officer has written to the providers of nurse education for all pre- and post-registration students to highlight GBS.

The National Screening Committee (NSC) currently does not recommend screening for GBS. The NSC will be reviewing this policy recommendation in 2012. The Chief Medical Officer has written to the NSC asking them to give this matter their earliest consideration.

Also, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) is revising its guideline "Prevention of Early Onset Neonatal Group B Streptococcal Disease". The revised guideline is due to be published in the new year.

In addition, my Department has commissioned the Guidelines and Audit Implementation Network (GAIN) to undertake an audit of GBS in Northern Ireland from an obstetric and neonatal perspective.

I will consider the outcome of the NSC review and the RCOG revised guideline before making a decision on screening for GBS in pregnancy.

HSC Trusts: Community Information System

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the procurement of a Community Information System for the north and west Belfast sector of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (i) whether the contract was put out to tender; (ii) whether the contract was for the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust only; (iii) whether his Department or Hewlett-Packard is able to provide the evaluation documentation produced for each supplier; (iv) why the existing suppliers were not consulted during the evaluation process; (v) what is the approved spend for the Community Information System; (vi) to detail the process followed in relation to the awarding of the contract, including how it was documented; and (vii) whether he will make this information available to the public **(AQW 2339/11-15)**

Mr Poots:

- I. The contract falls within the remit of the Technology Partner Framework Agreement which was procured via a fully competitive European procedure.
- II. The Contract will be effected by placement of an order with HP and is only for the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, although the Technology Partnership Framework Agreement can be used by all Trusts.
- III. In response to the Requirements issued by the Trust, HP provided a Contractor Solution Document describing the recommended approach. This can be made available.
- IV. There was no reason to consult existing suppliers during the evaluation process. The Belfast Trust's aim is to implement a system which meets the need of the Trust as a whole. Existing systems are not doing this.
- V. The approved baseline funding as detailed in the business case and approved by my Department for the Community Information System is £4.5m capital and £4.4m revenue.
- VI. The project is following standard project management procedures and all documentation relating to the awarding of the Contract is detailed. The Technology Partner Framework Agreement is based on a standard Public Sector ICT agreement and includes a number of Schedules which were used to define in detail each aspect of the Contract to be placed for the Belfast Trust. In relation to the Belfast Trust staff, every service group had an input into specifying the requirements. Following HP's selection of Civica as the provider of the Paris solution, Civica was required to respond to every requirement in the document issued by the Belfast Trust at the start of the procurement. The responses were then issued to each service group and the resultant comments were fed back to the supplier. This process was a timely but productive exercise and the Belfast Trust now has a comprehensive set of requirements and a system that meets the needs of Community Health

& Social Care staff. In addition, the project has been subject to a Gateway review which provided independent approval of the process and documentation.

VII. The information from this process can be made available to the public if required.

Department of Justice

Prison Service

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether the Prison Service can deal internally with criminal matters, such as the possession of indecent images of children, without reporting the incidents to the police.

(AQW 1556/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): The Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) does not deal internally with criminal offences.

Misconduct may give rise to a criminal prosecution as well as internal disciplinary proceedings. The NIPS Code of Conduct and Discipline makes provision for the police to be informed if there is evidence of a criminal offence or an allegation to that effect.

Prison Service Staff

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice who made the decision not to report to the PSNI that Prison Service staff members had been caught in possession of indecent images of children and that the matter should be handled internally.

(AQW 1557/11-15)

Mr Ford: As a result of an investigation into the use of the NIPS internet and email facility it was discovered that an inappropriate image had been emailed by two members of staff. Prison Service Headquarters referred the matter to the appropriate Governing Governor who in turn instigated disciplinary procedures under the NIPS Code of Conduct and Discipline. Police involvement was not considered by those staff who dealt with the case and therefore at that time the PSNI was not informed.

When one of the officers appealed against the outcome of the internal disciplinary process NIPS did seek advice from the PSNI. However, the case was not formally referred to the police for investigation.

Prison Service Staff

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether legislation exists that exempts Prison Service staff from prosecution for the possession of indecent images of children.

(AQW 1559/11-15)

Mr Ford: Legislation does not exempt prison service staff from prosecution if they commit a criminal offence.

Legally Detailed Persons

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the recent adverse publicity about his Department resulting from incidents such as the escape from custody of legally detailed persons, the death in custody of legally detained persons, the release of Brendan Lillis and the difficulties arising from the Legal Aid dispute, if he will make a statement to the Assembly outlining the steps he has taken to restore confidence in his Department.

(AQW 1569/11-15)

Mr Ford: As Minister of Justice, I am committed to ensuring that all aspects of the work of the Department command public confidence.

In response to specific issues raised, I have commissioned the Prison Review Team to conduct a review of the conditions of detention for prisoners in Northern Ireland, and I await with interest their final report which is due to be published next month.

In the interim, I have officially launched the NIPS Strategic Efficiency and Effectiveness (SEE) Programme, which is the vehicle by which the Prison Service will deliver the end to end transformational change envisaged by the Prison Review Team. I am confident that the outcome of this programme will be a more efficient and effective organisation, with a renewed focus on getting the basics right; that puts the offender at the heart of service delivery; and, reduces the risk of re-offending on release. Through the SEE Programme NIPS aims to become a service that is respected and valued by the community.

I have taken seriously those incidents which have resulted in the erroneous release of prisoners. Lessons have been learned and a wide range of measures have been put in place to improve communications, ensure cross checks are made, and to strengthen staff resources. Where appropriate, disciplinary action has been taken. I have kept the Assembly informed of my Department's response to these issues as they have arisen.

NIPS has also put in place a wide range of measures in relation to safer custody, including the introduction in February 2011 of a revised policy on Suicide & Self Harm Prevention and the Safer Custody Forum which I chair. The provision of safe, decent and secure custody is a strategic aim for NIPS.

The decision to release Brendan Lillis on licence was a matter solely for the Parole Commissioners, and not for my Department.

The successful resolution of the legal aid dispute, resulting in the ending of the withdrawal action by Solicitors on Friday 19 August demonstrated the determination of the Department of Justice to tackle difficult issues and has, I believe, enhanced public confidence in my Department.

I see no need to make further statements to the Assembly on any of the incidents mentioned in the question.

Brendan Lillis

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Justice what steps are in place to monitor the health of Brendan Lillis to ensure that an improvement in his health is followed by due process regarding the outstanding criminal charges he is facing.

(AQW 1570/11-15)

Mr Ford: A decision on whether Brendan Lillis stands trial on the outstanding criminal charges against him is a matter wholly for the Court and the Public Prosecution Service. The Department of Justice has no role in this and therefore has no arrangements in place to monitor the health of Mr Lillis with a view to the timing of a possible future prosecution.

Prison Service Staff

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 1557/11-15, whether he is aware of any other incidents of criminal offences being committed by Prison Service staff that have been dealt with internally and not reported to the PSNI; and to provide details of any such offences and when they occurred.

(AQW 1634/11-15)

Mr Ford: Discipline records, covering the last 3 years have been checked and indicate that the Northern Ireland Prison Service has dealt with a range of internal disciplinary issues, for example alleged fraud and alleged assault. However none have been considered appropriate for referral to the PSNI.

Convictions for Possessing Indecent Images of Children

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many people have been convicted of possessing indecent images of children in each of the last five years; and how many of these people were not (i) placed on the sex offenders register; nor (ii) bound by a Sexual Offences Prevention Order.

(AQW 1636/11-15)

Mr Ford: The table below gives the number convicted for the possession of indecent photographs or pseudo photographs of a child(ren), under Article 15 of the Criminal Justice (Evidence etc) (Northern Ireland) Order 1988, and possession with a view to distribution under Article 3(1)(c) of the Protection of Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1978.

I would also refer the Member to the reply given to the Member on 8 July 2011 (AQW/1196/11-15).

Data are collated on the principal offence rule; only the most serious offence for which an offender is convicted is included. The table covers the calendar years 2002 to 2006, the latest year for which figures are currently available. This was due to changes in how such data are collected but steps are now being taken as a matter of urgency to derive data for subsequent years. It is hoped information for the period 2007 to mid 2009 will be available in the near future; work on data for 2010 is also progressing in parallel.

POSSESSION OF INDECENT PHOTOGRAPHS OR PSEUDO PHOTOGRAPHS OF A CHILD(REN) – NUMBER CONVICTED, 2002-2006

Year	Number convicted
2002	0
2003	3
2004	2
2005	2
2006	0

Sex offender notification requirements are set by statute. Anyone convicted of these offences will automatically be subject to notification if they are over 18. Anyone under 18 would only attract notification if sentenced to imprisonment for a term of at least 12 months.

No sexual offences prevention orders applied in these cases.

Prison Service Staff

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether he is satisfied with the Prison Service's handling of the cases of Prison Service staff who were caught in possession of indecent images of children; and whether he intends to carry out an investigation in to why this matter was handled internally and not reported to the appropriate authorities.

(AQW 1699/11-15)

Mr Ford: As a result of an internal investigation two officers were disciplined on the basis that their actions constituted gross misconduct. While I do not intend to launch an investigation, following discussion with the current management of NIPS, this matter has now been referred to the PSNI.

Small Claims Court System

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice what plans he has to increase the use of mediators in the small claims court system.

(AQW 1708/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Small Claims Court has been subject to a number of important reforms over recent years.

Small Claims Online allows claimants to make an application using the Northern Ireland Courts & Tribunals Service website. It also allows parties to track the progress of proceedings online.

In May of this year, following public consultation (Increasing the Jurisdictional Limit of the County Courts in Northern Ireland), the financial limit of the Small Claims Court was increased from £2,000 to £3,000.

The consultation exercise also sought the views on the continued exclusion of certain types of claims from the Small Claims Court namely personal injury cases; and road traffic accidents. The responses did not express a uniform view. The County Court Rules prescribe these exclusions and the Rules are made by the County Court Rules Committee and allowed by my department. The Committee are presently considering the responses and will be reporting their recommendations to me in due course.

In 2010 the Northern Ireland Courts & Tribunals Service investigated the court-based Small Claims Mediation Scheme introduced in England & Wales to evaluate what benefits it may provide if reproduced in this jurisdiction. England and Wales provide in-house mediators whom litigants may avail of.

The Scheme offers an alternative method for resolving disputed small claims in order to reduce the number of cases going to court. One of the main benefits has been a reduction in the average listing time for small claims cases (from 14 to 6 weeks). The average listing time in Northern Ireland is already considerably lower (8 weeks).

For these reasons it was felt that an in-house mediation scheme in Northern Ireland would not provide value for money, although this will be kept under review. In the meantime it is always open to parties in small claims proceedings to have recourse to third-party mediation where they wish to do so.

My Department has recently supported the publication of a leaflet on "Alternatives to Court" which has been led by the Northern Ireland Ombudsman's Office and Law Centre (NI). The leaflet is designed to demonstrate the options for dealing with many types of disputes and explains how alternatives to court work in practice and when they can be used. In particular, the leaflet deals with alternative dispute resolution which includes mediation. It is my view that Alternative Dispute Resolution should be seen as one of the first avenues to be considered by parties who find themselves at odds. It is a commonsense option which delivers speedy access to justice.

The Access to Justice Review, published on 13 September 2011, is very clear that one solution might be greater use of mediation, or other alternative dispute resolution approaches, and this is a recurring theme throughout the report. It states that many disputes do not necessarily need to be resolved in a court hearing, and recommends the use of mediation, collaborative interventions or other alternatives to court proceedings. As you will know, some of these alternatives are already in use in Northern Ireland, but the report recommends that they be developed further. I fully support this.

Small Claims Court System

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice what research his Department has carried out, or intends to carry out, on the use of the mediation system in England as an alternative route for small claims in the court system.

(AQW 1709/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Small Claims Court has been subject to a number of important reforms over recent years.

Small Claims Online allows claimants to make an application using the Northern Ireland Courts & Tribunals Service website. It also allows parties to track the progress of proceedings online.

In May of this year, following public consultation (Increasing the Jurisdictional Limit of the County Courts in Northern Ireland), the financial limit of the Small Claims Court was increased from £2,000 to £3,000.

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Small Claims Court System

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice whether he has any plans to reform the small claims court. **(AQW 1710/11-15)**

Mr Ford: The Small Claims Court has been subject to a number of important reforms over recent years.

Small Claims Online allows claimants to make an application using the Northern Ireland Courts & Tribunals Service website. It also allows parties to track the progress of proceedings online.

In May of this year, following public consultation (Increasing the Jurisdictional Limit of the County Courts in Northern Ireland), the financial limit of the Small Claims Court was increased from £2,000 to £3,000.

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Part-time Reserve Gratuity Scheme

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice whether he will extend the time limit for applications to the Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme.

(AQW 1719/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Part-Time Gratuity Scheme had to have a cut-off date due to the fact that all of the £20m provided by the government was ringfenced solely for the payment and administration of the scheme. Therefore the value of each payment was dependent on the number of verified applications. It has been necessary to have a deadline, in order that a value could be attached to each payment and therefore make it possible to make any payments.

Brendan Lillis

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice what cognisance his Department gave to representations made by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to Brendan Lillis.

(AQW 1749/11-15)

Mr Ford: No representations were received by me from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to Brendan Lillis.

Functions of the Parole Commissioners

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice what consideration is being given to reviewing the functions of the Parole Commissioners and the public transparency of its decision making.

(AQW 1750/11-15)

Mr Ford: The functions of the Parole Commissioners are set out in the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008. I recently appointed a new Chief Parole Commissioner and will be discussing with her any views she might have on possible changes to Commissioners’ procedures including the availability of information on their decision making.

Brendan Lillis

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice whether Brendan Lillis received an unauthorised visit in Maghaberry Prison; and if so, by whom he was visited and for what reason.

(AQW 1751/11-15)

Mr Ford: On 2 August 2011 Mr Lillis received a visit from his partner Roisin Allsopp. Ms Allsopp was accompanied on the visit by Alison Morris, a journalist with the Irish News, and Doctor Sean O’Donhnaill.

The visit was booked by Ms Allsopp under the normal domestic/family visiting arrangements and as such was an authorised visit. However neither Ms Morris or Dr O'Donhail had requested, or were given, permission to visit in a professional capacity.

Subsequently the Irish News published an article written by Alison Morris based on her visit and Dr O'Donhail claimed to have carried out an examination of Mr Lillis.

Community Service Schemes

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether he has any plans to change the current community service schemes to impose stricter criteria and to ensure that the work undertaken is of benefit to the general community.

(AQW 1768/11-15)

Mr Ford: PBNI undertakes Community Service in conjunction with approximately 300 community based and voluntary organisations across Northern Ireland.

When surveyed, 97% of beneficiaries agreed that the community had directly benefited from the work undertaken through community service schemes.

A new strategy for Community Service was introduced in July 2010 with the objectives of increasing the prompt commencement of work and increasing the number of hours worked on a weekly basis. An audit of a sample of community orders, undertaken in June 2011, demonstrated an increase in both these measures.

The Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) will shortly introduce a Best Practice Framework, which will include more stringent enforcement procedures.

Legal Aid for Riot-related Convictions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 1404/11-15, to detail the total spend on legal aid on cases relating to rioting over the Twelfth of July period in 2010.

(AQW 1769/11-15)

Mr Ford: The total spend to date in respect of representation in the Magistrate's Court is £46,346.98 (including VAT of £7,156.37)

The total spend to date in respect of representation of the Crown Court is £67,241.46 (including VAT of £9,666.56 and disbursements of £6,493.09). To date, bills in respect of proceedings at the Crown Court have only been submitted in relation to 18 out of 29 defendants.

The total spend to date with regard to Green Form/PACE payments, for advice given at the police station, which is not included in the standard fee, is £2,546.25 (including VAT of £378.56 and disbursements of £7.16).

The total paid to date in respect of the County Court is £318.00 (including VAT of £53.00)

Pardon

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether a prison governor can apply for a pardon on behalf of a serving prisoner.

(AQW 1770/11-15)

Mr Ford: A prison governor can not apply for a pardon on behalf of a serving prisoner.

In the course of his duties a Governor would be able to provide a prisoner with information on how to apply for a pardon or assist the prisoner in the completion of an application for a pardon. However, the prisoner remains the applicant.

Antisocial Behaviour in Towns and Villages

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice what steps he is taking to deal with anti-social behaviour in towns and villages, particularly amongst young people; and for his assessment of the usefulness of extending the PSNI's power of discretion so they could disperse groups of young people from public places.

(AQW 1774/11-15)

Mr Ford: My Department works in partnership to address anti-social behaviour through a mixture of prevention, intervention and enforcement approaches.

I am currently considering the views received in response to the consultation on 'Building Safer, Shared and Confident Communities', including powers of dispersal, and intend to publish a new Community Safety Strategy by the end of the year.

Pardon

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether a pardon completely clears a criminal offence from a person's record.

(AQW 1787/11-15)

Mr Ford: A pardon, under the Royal Prerogative of Mercy, would not quash or annul a criminal offence. The offence would therefore remain on the person's criminal record.

Multi-agency Risk Assessment Conferences

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the introduction of the information-sharing protocol for Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences.

(AQW 1795/11-15)

Mr Ford: The draft Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC), Information Sharing Agreement (ISA) will be considered at the inaugural meeting of the MARAC Operational Group on 26 September; and in early October will be distributed to partner agencies for final consultation and agreement. Once agreed the ISA will be reviewed regularly.

Rioting and Looting in England

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the sentences handed down by judges following the recent rioting and looting in England; and whether he will consider introducing similar sentencing guidelines.

(AQW 1824/11-15)

Mr Ford: The offence of riot was considered in the review of the sentencing framework legislated for in the Criminal Justice (NI) Order 2008 which introduced public protection sentences. Riot was included in Schedules 1 and 2 of the Order as a specified violent offence and so can attract an indeterminate or extended public protection sentence. Under common law in Northern Ireland, the maximum sentence available for riot is life. Sentencing decisions, within the legislative framework, are a matter for the judiciary, taking account of all the factors pertaining in individual cases.

Last year, I issued a consultation which considered a range of potential mechanisms by which greater transparency, consistency and understanding of sentencing practice might be achieved. I hope to announce proposals later in the autumn on how best these might be delivered in a way that will promote public confidence.

Sentences for Knife Crime

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what plans he has to increase sentences for knife crime.

(AQW 1844/11-15)

Mr Ford: Sentencing itself is a matter for the courts, within parameters laid down by statute. Just this year the Justice Act completed the creation of a standard set of stringent maximum penalties available to the courts for a range of offences involving knives and other offensive weapons. These include mostly possession offences, for which prison terms of up to 12 months are available from magistrates' courts, with up to 4 years from the Crown Court. In addition, more severe penalties are available where a knife or weapon is used in an attack.

I have no plans to increase the current maximum sentences. However, I take knife crime very seriously and I do keep these matters under constant review.

Police Ombudsman

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice how many cases were concluded by the Police Ombudsman in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1868/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Police Ombudsman has advised that the number of cases (includes complaints and referrals) concluded in each of the last five years are as follows:

	Cases received	Cases closed
2006/07	3283	3091
2007/08	2996	3049
2008/09	3092	3286
2009/10	3542	3532
2010/11	3313	3592

Part-time Reserve Gratuity Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice what investigation is planned into the breach of security in relation to the Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme.

(AQW 1870/11-15)

Mr Ford: On 22 August I instructed officials in the Department of Justice's Security Branch to undertake an investigation into the circumstances of this regrettable incident.

Part-time Reserve Gratuity Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice how many successful applications were made to the Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme.

(AQW 1872/11-15)

Mr Ford: There were 6,157 successful applications made to the Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme. There were four applications rejected for reasons other than late applications. However there are 57 applications pending appeals panel decisions.

There have been 32 late applications received.

Part-time Reserve Gratuity Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice how many applications to the Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme were rejected for reasons other than late application.

(AQW 1873/11-15)

Mr Ford: There were 6,157 successful applications made to the Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme. There were four applications rejected for reasons other than late applications. However there are 57 applications pending appeals panel decisions.

There have been 32 late applications received.

Part-time Reserve Gratuity Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice how many late applications were received for the Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme.

(AQW 1874/11-15)

Mr Ford: There were 6,157 successful applications made to the Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme. There were four applications rejected for reasons other than late applications. However there are 57 applications pending appeals panel decisions.

There have been 32 late applications received.

Court Filming

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of court filming being allowed in England and Wales and the broadcasting of Judges' remarks and sentencing; and whether he will consider allowing similar court filming in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1891/11-15)

Mr Ford: As I said in response to AQ0365/11-15, I have asked my Department to monitor how the plans recently announced in England and Wales in relation to filming in courts develop, and to consider whether there are any lessons to be learned.

As stated previously, I consider that there are a number of important factors which will need to be taken into account when assessing the merit of lifting the ban on filming in courts in Northern Ireland.

The potential impact which allowing filming in courts may have on victims and witnesses would have to be weighed very carefully against their particular needs.

The appetite of the public for the presence of cameras in courts, and the views of the judiciary and the legal profession, would be important factors in assessing the worth of the proposal.

Consideration would also have to be given to the cost to the public purse and the risk that cameras in courts could lead to sensationalism of proceedings.

Rioting in Ballyclare and Carrickfergus

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Justice (i) how many arrests were made in relation to the rioting in Ballyclare and Carrickfergus on 9 July 2011; and (ii) how many people have been prosecuted and convicted in relation to the disturbances.

(AQW 1908/11-15)

Mr Ford: Fourteen arrests have been made by the PSNI, to date (15 September 2011), in relation to the rioting in Ballyclare and Carrickfergus on 9 July 2011.

The nature of many of the offences charged is serious and the cases concerned are under consideration by PPS prosecutors. Information is not yet available on convictions, therefore.

Prisoner Numbers

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the number of prisoners currently in each jail; (ii) the number of prisoners in each jail for sexual abuse of children or similar offences; and (iii) the number of such prisoners who have re-offended in the last five years.

(AQW 1923/11-15)

Mr Ford:

Establishment	Maghaberry	Magilligan	Hydebank Wood	Total
(i) Prison Population	965	509	277	1751
(ii) Numbers in each jail for sexual offences against children or similar offences.	13	74	1	88
(iii) Numbers of prisoners in (ii) who have re-offended in the last five years.*	2	4	2	8

The table above provides details of prisoners who have committed sexual offences against children. The figures have been collated from electronic records held by Northern Ireland Prison Service and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland.

The figures in row (ii) relate to those prisoners sentenced for sexual offences against children. They do not include prisoners who are currently being held on remand for sexual offences against children.

* Of the 8 prisoners in row (iii) who have committed previous offences in the last 5 years, only one of these was in relation to a sex offence against a child.

Historical Enquiries Team Cases

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice how many Historical Enquiries Team cases were concluded by the Office of the Police Ombudsman in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1924/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Police Ombudsman has advised that the number of Historical cases concluded in each of the last five calendar years are as follows:

2007	19
2008	13
2009	7
2010	4
2011	4

Clare's Law

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the proposed 'Clare's Law'; and how beneficial it would be.

(AQW 1959/11-15)

Mr Ford: My Department has not yet made any detailed policy assessment of this proposal. However, I am aware of the background and that the PSNI are following UK-wide developments through the Association of Chief Police Officers.

Category C Prisoners

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice whether he has any plans to house Category C prisoners on any part of the Lisnevin site in Millisle.

(AQW 1970/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service is currently conducting a Strategic Review. The Lisnevin site forms part of that review.

I can confirm that at present there are no plans to use any part of the Lisnevin complex to detain category C prisoners.

AccessNI Checks

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the total number of AccessNI checks that have been carried out in each of the last five years; (ii) the number of people who have had (a) one AccessNI check; (b) 2-5 AccessNI checks; and (c) more than 5 AccessNI checks over the last five years; and (iii) the total revenue generated by the AccessNI checks in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1995/11-15)

Mr Ford:

- (i) Listed below are details of the total number of AccessNI checks that have been carried out since the organisation became operational on 1 April 2008. These figures include all levels of disclosure certificate available (basic, standard and enhanced certificate):

1 April 2008 – 31 March 2009	115,313
1 April 2009 – 31 March 2010	146,886
1 April 2010 – 31 March 2011	127,127
1 April 2011 – 15 September 2011 (most up to date figures)	54,543

- (ii) AccessNI is unable to provide figures on the number of multiple applications that individuals have made. When an application is received by AccessNI a unique reference number is allocated and each application is treated afresh. There is no search facility for multiple applications.

- (iii) Listed below are details of the total revenue generated by the AccessNI checks in each financial year since the operational date of 1 April 2008:

2008/09	£2,829,613
2009/10	£3,292,178
2010/11	£3,079,564
2011/12(to 31 August)	£1,082,410

In terms of the revenue generated, it is important to note that AccessNI does not charge volunteers for applications in most circumstances. Those applications make up around 26% of all applications for enhanced disclosures.

AccessNI Checks

Mr Hussey asked Minister of Justice why people who go through an AccessNI check cannot use this authorisation for more than one organisation or position at a time.

(AQW 1997/11-15)

Mr Ford: AccessNI operates under Part V of the Police Act 1997 and the subordinate legislation made under it. The regulations require an application for employment or voluntary work with children or vulnerable adults or both in specified areas to be specific to that role. An applicant cannot apply for a certificate for general employment.

AccessNI certificates provide any known criminal history or, in the case of an enhanced certificate, other relevant information in regard to an applicant in respect of the particular position applied for. The information on the certificate is current at the date the certificate is prepared: criminal records

information could change after the certificate has been issued which is why at present certificates are not portable across "employment". In addition, legal requirements for certain types of employment require some employers to obtain a new AccessNI check for any new employee.

In March 2011 I asked Sunita Mason, the United Kingdom Government's Independent Advisor for Criminality Information Management, to carry out a review of the Criminal Record Regime in Northern Ireland. I asked her to consider the issue of how disclosures could be made more portable across different sectors of employment to reduce the number of applications made. Mrs Mason reported in August 2011 and her report has been published. She has recommended that a system of portable disclosures should be introduced and that this should be supported by introducing an on-line facility to enable employers to validate the portable check. I am currently considering the report.

Part-time Reserve Gratuity Scheme

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Justice whether he has identified who was responsible for the breach of security in relation to the Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme notifications.

(AQW 2014/11-15)

Mr Ford: I am awaiting a Report from the review conducted into the circumstances of how this regrettable incident occurred.

Libel Cases

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice (i) how many libel cases have been heard in each of the last three years; and (ii) how many writs for libel have been issued in the last 18 months.

(AQW 2035/11-15)

Mr Ford: The tables below set out (i) the number of libel actions heard in the High Court and County Court for each of the last three years, and (ii) the number of writs for libel that have been issued in the last 18 months.

(I) LIBEL CASES HEARD IN EACH OF THE LAST THREE YEARS

	2008	2009	2010
High Court Libel Disposed of at Court	11	22	64
County Court Libel/Slander Disposed of at Court	1	-	3

Notes: In the County Court there is no distinction between libel and slander cases.

In April 2008 a High Court practice direction set out new procedures for setting down an action for trial. A rolling exercise to dispose of old cases involved listing cases for court and disposing of them accordingly; this resulted in elevated figures for court disposals in 2009 and 2010.

(II) WRITS AND CIVIL BILLS FOR LIBEL ISSUED IN THE LAST 18 MONTHS

	01/03/10 – 31/08/2011
High Court Libel Writs	57
County Court Libel/Slander Civil Bills	1

Notes: Data for 2011 should be treated as provisional.

In the County Court there is no distinction between libel and slander cases.

Arm's-length Bodies

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Justice to detail the cost to his Department of its arm's-length bodies in each of the last two years.

(AQW 2068/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department of Justice came into existence on 12th April 2010. Details of expenditure before that date are a matter for the previous department

The cost of arm's length bodies for the 2010/2011 financial year, are set out in the table below. The costs provided are the Resource DEL (Departmental Expenditure Limit), Resource AME (Annually Managed Expenditure) and Capital DEL for each body, based on their 2010/2011 outturn.

DOJ ARM'S LENGTH BODIES EXPENDITURE 2010/2011 (£'000S)

Name of Body	Resource DEL	Resource AME	Total Resource	Capital DEL
Executive NDPBs				
Police Service of Northern Ireland	901,193	-368,284	532,909	42,067
Probation Board for Northern Ireland	20,877	-1,816	19,061	224
Northern Ireland Policing Board	8,320	-103	8,217	358
Office of the Police Ombudsman Northern Ireland	8,596	-40	8,556	229
Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland	1,484	0	1,484	0
Northern Ireland Police Fund	1,995	0	1,995	0
RUC George Cross Foundation	133	0	133	0
Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission	98,198	1,200	99,398	743
Advisory NDPBs				
Independent Assessor for PSNI Recruitment Applications	18	0	18	0
Northern Ireland Law Commission	1,047	0	1,047	0
Non-Profit Institutions Serving Households				
Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust	3,107	0	3,107	0
Independent Statutory Office Holder				
Parole Commissioners / Remission of Sentences Commissioners	1,331	50	1,381	28
Prisoner Ombudsman	660	0	660	0

Name of Body	Resource DEL	Resource AME	Total Resource	Capital DEL
Commissioner for Hearings Under Prison Rule 109B	0	0	0	0
Voluntary Support Bodies				
RUC Widows Association	40	0	40	0
Independent Monitoring Boards				
Independent Monitoring Boards	174	0	174	0
Others				
Prison Service Trust	298	0	298	0
Northern Ireland Prison Service Sports Association	14	0	14	0
Central Benevolent Fund	12	0	12	0

Department of Justice: Capital Assets

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice to detail all the capital assets held by his Department. (AQW 2095/11-15)

Mr Ford: Capital assets held by the Department of Justice, excluding Executive NDPBs, as at 31 March 2011 are set out in the table below.

This information is taken from the Department's Resource Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011, which are available from the Assembly Library and from the Department's website at the following link,

http://www.dojni.gov.uk/index/publications/publication-categories/pubs-departmental-business/departments_of_justice_resource_accounts_2010-11.htm

£'000s	Cost or Valuation as at 31 March 2011	Depreciation / Amortisation as at 31 March 2011	Net Book Value as at 31 March 2011
Property, Plant and Equipment			
Land	38,838	-	38,838
Buildings and Dwellings	444,743	77,192	367,551
Vehicles, Plant and Machinery	65,023	37,865	27,158
Information Technology	46,029	29,053	16,976
Assets Under Construction	10,902	-	10,902
Total Property, Plant and Equipment	605,535	144,110	461,425
Total Intangible Assets	31,236	20,968	10,268
Total Capital Assets	636,771	165,078	471,693

Department of Justice: Efficiency Plans

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what efficiency plans his Department has outlined for the next four years.

(AQW 2096/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department of Justice published its budget for the financial years 2011 to 2015 on 10 March 2011. The table below provides an overview of the savings targets factored into budgets over the next four years.

Further detail on the savings plans will be published on the DOJ Internet following a presentation to the Justice Committee on 6 October 2011.

SAVINGS TARGETS FACTORED INTO FINAL BUDGET ALLOCATIONS - RESOURCE DEL £M

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Justice Delivery	0.6	2.6	4.1	5.1
Justice Policy	0.0	1.4	1.9	2.5
Policing and Community Safety	2.6	2.7	2.9	3.0
NI Prison Service (1)	(13.0)	5.4	23.5	23.3
Compensation Agency	0.2	1.0	7.6	7.6
Forensic Science NI	-	-	-	0.1
Youth Justice Agency	1.2	2.0	2.3	2.3
NI Courts and Tribunals Service	5.5	4.7	6.3	6.8
Police Service of NI	37.0	63.9	74.8	85.6
Police Ombudsman	0.5	0.8	1.2	1.6
Policing Board	0.4	1.1	1.2	1.6
Probation Board for NI	0.9	1.5	2.7	3.1
Criminal Justice Inspection NI	-	0.1	0.2	0.3
NI Legal Services Commission	0.4	1.0	3.4	3.7
Total savings targets	36.3	88.2	132.1	146.6

Note 1: The £13m in brackets indicates a net injection of £13m into the NI Prison Service budget to fund an 'invest to save' programme from which savings will flow in future years.

Police Officers Suspended from Duty

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many police officers are currently suspended from duty because they are facing prosecution, broken down by court division.

(AQW 2134/11-15)

Mr Ford: The suspension of police officers from duty is a matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the role of the Policing Board. You may therefore wish to direct your question to the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Prisons: Currency Seizures from Visitors

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice (i) on how many occasions have there been currency seizures from visitors to prison establishments from 1 January 2009 to date; (ii) how much has been seized; and (iii) to detail the dates, amounts and locations of the seizures.

(AQW 2215/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Prison Service has not seized any currency from visitors to prisoners from January 2009 to date.

There has been one recent case when a seizure was made by PSNI. The circumstances of that case are a matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the role of the Policing Board.

You may therefore wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

Part-time Reserve Gratuity Scheme

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Justice to consider extending the time limit for applications to the Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme to allow additional applications.

(AQO 359/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme has had to operate within a strictly limited amount of funding, and in the context of a desire to maximize the use of that funding. Therefore, the calculation of the amounts to be paid out has been based upon the number of applications. This has been to ensure that the full amount has been used. It is not, therefore, possible to reopen the existing scheme because all the available money has been allocated to those who did apply on time.

To open a new scheme would require Executive approval and the identification of funding from within the DOJ budget. Neither is likely to be possible.

Police Ombudsman

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Justice what safeguards are in place to ensure that his Department does not interfere with the independence and effectiveness of the Office of the Police Ombudsman.

(AQO 361/11-15)

Mr Ford: My Department has a Framework Document in place which governs the relationship between us and the Office of the Police Ombudsman (OPONI). This framework is based on a model set out by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and it applies to all Arms Length Bodies (ALBs).

The framework does not give the Department any locus to intervene in the operational and investigative side of OPONI. The Ombudsman has an independence of action with regard to the investigation of cases which I fully respect. The Department however needs to be able to monitor the efficiency and effectiveness of the Office given the responsibility that we have for corporate governance, OPONI's responsibility to me and in turn my responsibility to the Assembly and Executive.

Legal Aid: Non-molestation Orders

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the effects the removal of the financial eligibility limits for people applying for legal aid has had on their ability to take a Non-Molestation Order through the court system.

(AQO 362/11-15)

Mr Ford: Since the introduction of the waiver on 22 December 2010, the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission has granted 82 applications under the waiver scheme, none of whom would have qualified for legal aid before the introduction of the waiver.

Although in some of the cases a financial contribution may be required, the waiver has allowed legal assistance to be provided to 82 individuals who needed help urgently in difficult circumstances, and who otherwise may have found it difficult to access the courts.

The waiver provides a good example of the kind of change I want to make to improve the justice system. Many more ideas are set out in the final report of the review of Access to Justice in Northern Ireland, which I published last week.

Police Museum

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the creation of a new Police Museum.
(AQO 363/11-15)

Mr Ford: I fully support the creation of a Police Museum. However there are still some issues to be resolved before the outline business case can be submitted to Department of Finance and Personnel including planning issues, and further consideration by PSNI of scale, location, access and throughput issues.

I have appraised the RUC GC Foundation and other key stakeholders regarding the matters to be addressed and my officials are working with the Foundation to address the outstanding issues as a matter of priority so as the business case can be completed.

Police Ombudsman: Criminal Justice Inspection

Ms Ruane asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the inspection by the Criminal Justice Inspectorate of the Office of the Police Ombudsman, particularly in relation to the Loughinisland Massacre.
(AQO 364/11-15)

Mr Ford: I welcome the CJINI report of their inspection of the Office of the Police Ombudsman and I recognise that there is essential work to be done to improve the operation of the Police Ombudsman's office and to ensure it is capable of securing widespread public confidence, particularly in dealing with historic cases.

I note, however, that the Chief Inspector did not address individual cases or specific investigations. Neither he nor I would seek to comment on the implications of the findings of his inspection in respect of the Loughinisland Massacre or any other report.

I have accepted the recommendation that no historic cases should be commenced or completed until CJINI has indicated that the recommendations are essentially complete and the way is free to resume with confidence. I also recognise the challenge that the investigation of historic cases poses for the Police Ombudsman. In the absence of a consensus politically about the past makes it hard to envisage the early creation of an alternative mechanism to address these cases. I re-iterate my call for a public debate on these issues and urge the Secretary of State, First Minister and deputy First Minister to consider how that debate can most effectively be taken forward.

Part-time Reserve Gratuity Scheme

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Justice how many part-time RUC Reserve Officers had their security breached by his Department when notifications of the Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme were issued.
(AQO 365/11-15)

Mr Ford: 6157 letters were issued to recipients of the Part-Time reserve Gratuity, some of which showed the subject matter of the letter with the address.

157 people have contacted the Department to express concern.

A security assessment has been sought arising from this incident generally and in respect of those who contacted the Department in particular.

Police Ombudsman

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Justice whether he has any plans to change the remit of the Office of the Police Ombudsman in respect of dealing with the past.

(AQO 366/11-15)

Mr Ford: I have no plans to change the remit of the Police Ombudsman in respect of dealing with the past. Our compliance with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) requires us to have a mechanism for the independent investigation of these cases, and the Police Ombudsman still has critical responsibilities in this area.

However, I recognise that there is essential work to be done to improve the operation of OPONI and to ensure it is capable of securing widespread public confidence in the investigation of historic cases. I believe that no more investigations should be initiated or concluded until the recommendations of the recent CJINI report have been implemented.

I also recognise the challenge to the Office of the Police Ombudsman in investigating historical cases. The absence of a political consensus about the past makes it hard to envisage the early creation of an alternative mechanism to address those cases. I, therefore, welcome a public debate on these issues, and I have urged the Secretary of State, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to consider how that debate can be taken forward most effectively.

Department for Regional Development

Severe Winter Weather Conditions: Foyle

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans are in place to deal with any potential severe winter weather conditions in the Foyle constituency.

(AQW 1561/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): My Department's Roads Service has in place sufficient finance, labour and materials to satisfactorily carry out the Winter Service programme for the incoming winter season of 2011/12.

Although Roads Service has no statutory obligation to salt roads, it does earmark funds to provide a salting service with the aim of helping main road traffic to move safely and freely in wintry conditions, through the removal of snow and the gritting of the salted network across Northern Ireland.

Prior to the start of each winter service season, Roads Service undertakes a significant amount of pre-planning to ensure a state of readiness for the coming winter. As well as a number of routine pre-season checks, planning incorporates ensuring that adequate staffing arrangements are in place, including training for new staff, where required, there is an adequate supply of salt and winter service equipment is in working order.

It is Roads Service's policy to salt main through routes carrying more than 1,500 vehicles per day and other busy through routes, where there are difficult circumstances such as steep hills, carrying more than 1,000 vehicles per day. In applying the criteria, buses get a high weighting. For example, a 40 seater bus is counted as 40 vehicles. This policy results in the provision of a salted network of approximately 7,000 km (4,300 miles) covering 28% of roads in Northern Ireland, targeting Roads Service's resources to the busier routes carrying most traffic.

Efforts are also made to ensure that small settlements of more than 100 dwellings have a treated link to the salted network and consideration is given to placing grit piles or salt bins at hills, bends or junctions on roads that are not salted.

In addition, Roads Service has introduced improvements to its operational response around rural schools regularly affected by adverse weather conditions. These improvements have ensured better communications between Roads Service and schools which experience difficulties and has allowed Roads Service to provide a more flexible and timely response as and when road conditions necessitate.

Whilst it is never possible to completely counteract the full forces of nature, based on the information currently available, it is my assessment that Roads Service is well prepared to deal with the incoming winter season.

Following its publication on 3 March 2011, Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has been working to implement the recommendations made in the Report of the Investigations into the Freeze/Thaw incident 2010/11. These recommendations, covering communications, contingency planning, assets, governance and leadership and resilience, are intended to ensure that NIW is better prepared to handle the effects of severe weather conditions similar to those experienced last Christmas. NIW currently plans to have approximately 90% of the short/medium term recommendations complete by December 2011, with the final 10% being completed by June 2012. There are a further ten actions that are of a long term nature and will be completed by 2015.

NIW's response to severe winter weather conditions will be based on its Major Incident Plan (MIP) which has been revised following lessons learnt from last winter. It reflects current water industry best practice and incorporates lessons learned from wider industry events. The MIP aims to provide a fully planned response to all types of emergency. NIW emergency planning also includes a range of contingency plans for specific types of event including severe weather conditions during the winter months. NIW will be testing these before the winter.

Improvements to NIW's arrangements include: staff availability; transport; contractors; fuel; water storage; liaison with third parties; alternative water supplies and telephone communications. In addition, NIW will be launching a winter publicity campaign to help customers prepare for the winter. This will include advice and information on lagging pipes and on dealing with burst pipes.

Railways: Larne Line

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Regional Development for an estimate of the potential savings over the next five years as a result of the proposed reductions in rail services on the Larne Line.
(AQW 1562/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Timetables for the Larne line are still in draft. However Translink have informed me that the proposed reduction in services between Whitehead and Larne, are expected to yield operational cost savings in the region of £500,000 to £700,000 per year over the next five years.

Railways: Larne Line

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the average number of passengers who have travelled daily on the Larne Line during off-peak hours over the last six months.
(AQW 1563/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: NI Railways report that under their fare system the time of day is only captured when the ticket is sold to the customer, not when the ticket is used to travel. There is therefore no means of electronically recording when every passenger journey is made. NI Railways however has provided an estimate of 451,000 passenger journeys on the Larne Line during off-peak hours over the last six months from 1st March 2011 to 31st August 2011. Over the same period NI Railways operated 5,980 off peak services. This is an average of 230 services per week. On this basis the estimated daily average number of passenger journeys on the Larne Line during off-peak hours over the last six months is around 2,470.

The large bulk of the daily passenger journeys on the Larne line travel on the Belfast-Carrickfergus-Whitehead section.

Residents' Parking Schemes

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Regional Development why he is piloting residents' parking schemes in Belfast despite past opposition to the schemes and while opportunities exist to pilot such schemes in other towns such as Bangor.

(AQW 1564/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) 2015 identified a number of locations where there should be parking restraint and initial focus has been in areas where the problems have been assessed to be most critical and long standing. The introduction of residents' parking schemes within the Belfast Metropolitan Area (BMA) is currently focused in areas close to Belfast city centre.

My Department's Roads Service is currently engaged with a number of local communities with a view to developing and implementing schemes in those areas. These are not pilot schemes, but the first in a number of schemes to be developed, consulted upon and hopefully implemented in due course.

As the design and consultation process in these areas is well advanced, I believe there is merit in continuing with this work with a view to having schemes implemented as soon as possible.

In addition, it is Roads Service's intention to work towards the introduction of Residents' Parking Schemes, where appropriate, within all areas of parking restraint identified within the BMTP. I would hope that, in due course, schemes could be progressed in Lisburn, Bangor and Carrickfergus, subject to the availability of resources and public acceptance.

Flags and Advertisements on Street Light Posts

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 1537/11-15 (i) who owned the unauthorised signs that the Department removed from lampposts in Cloughy in May 2011; (ii) if he is aware of how much the owners spent on the signs; and (iii) whether the Department asked those responsible for posting the unauthorised signs to remove them before departmental officials were instructed to do so.

(AQW 1565/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my previous response (AQW 1537/11-15) when I advised him that my Department's Roads Service did not remove any unauthorised advertising signs in the Cloughy area during the month of May 2011. However, I did confirm that 16 such signs were removed during June 2011, details of which are as follows:

- The Corner Kitchen, Fish & Chips, (9)
- Cloughey Holiday Village, (2)
- Sunbeds now open, Main Street, Kircubbin, (1)
- Chip Ahoy, The Harbour, Portavogie, (1)
- Coal For Sale, (1)
- JK Estate Agents, Kircubbin, (2)

I am not aware of how much the owners spent on the signs removed.

My Department is under no obligation to contact offenders prior to the removal of unauthorised signs from a public road. Consequently, officials did not contact those responsible for posting the unauthorised signs to request their removal in advance of taking action.

Footpaths: Kilcooley Estate, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development in which areas of the Kilcooley Estate in Bangor do footpaths need replaced.

(AQW 1574/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that following the completion of a programme to replace flagged footways in the Kilcooley Estate, it has no further plans to replace footways in this Estate. All Roads Service footways within the Estate are considered to be in a safe and serviceable condition and are subject to routine cyclic safety inspections.

Roads Service: Monthly Estate Walkabouts

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the policy on the attendance and participation of Roads Service officials in monthly estate walkabouts that are organised by community groups.

(AQW 1582/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that no formal policy exists in relation to attendance at community group walkabouts.

Monthly community walkabouts within the North Down area are a relatively new initiative introduced by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Roads Service officials have attended a number of these to establish the benefits to the local community and to Roads Service.

I am informed that, in the opinion of local Roads Service officials, while a considerable amount of staff time has been expended in support of this initiative, many of the issues raised do not fall within the responsibilities of Roads Service. To ensure finite staff resources are used as efficiently as possible, local officials would be willing to meet on site to progress matters that are specific to Roads Service.

I should add that Roads Service has already undertaken regular safety inspections and operates a policy to respond to written or verbal enquiries raised through local representatives and the general public.

Attendance by Roads Service staff at regular community group meetings will also continue to act as a forum for discussions on issues of concern and the exchange of information.

My Department's Roads Service strives to provide a quality service to the local community and the local office remains focused on this objective, in so far as the staffing resources available permit.

A6 from Castledawson to Derry

Mr Dallat asked Minister for Regional Development to outline the current position on the plans to upgrade the A6 from Castledawson to Derry; and whether there has been a decision taken on the decoupling of the plans for a by-pass at Dungiven.

(AQW 1600/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: As the Member may be aware, the preliminary assessment of the A6 Castledawson to Londonderry dualling scheme recommended that the western section of the route, including the Dungiven Bypass, should be taken forward at an early stage. Other sections of the A6 should be implemented as demand dictates and depending on the availability of funding.

My Department's Roads Service has advised that it expects to publish an Environmental Statement, draft Direction Order and draft Vesting Order later this year for the 30 kilometre dual carriageway from Londonderry to Dungiven, including a dual carriageway bypass of Dungiven. Publication of these Orders will invite formal comment and objection, which will most likely lead to a Public Inquiry in the spring of 2012 and examine the case for and against the scheme.

There is no merit at this stage in 'decoupling' the Dungiven Bypass element of the overall project. If deemed necessary, this could be done at a later date.

Given the reduction of two-fifths in the Executive's overall capital funding, the funds currently allocated to my Department in the 2011-2015 budget would not allow construction of the Londonderry to Dungiven dual carriageway, or Dungiven Bypass, to commence before 2014-2015, at the earliest.

Railways: Personnel

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of personnel with managerial responsibilities employed by NI Railways; and to outline the cost of these personnel in salaries, pension contributions and national insurance.

(AQW 1604/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink have informed me that the number of personnel with managerial responsibilities currently employed by NI Railways is 35. This covers staff in railway operations, fleet engineering and railway infrastructure. It excludes managers who provide services across Translink particularly in capital projects.

Monthly salaries for this group of employees amount to £114,351. Relevant National Insurance contributions total £9,563, with corresponding pension contributions of £20,583.

Invasive Plant Species

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Regional Development whether Roads Service has a strategy for managing invasive plant species such as Japanese Knotweed.

(AQW 1639/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it has no specific statutory obligation to remove weeds, other than in relation to the control of noxious weeds. Roads Service policy and procedures in relation to weed control are aimed at ensuring the safety of road users and preventing the deterioration of the road pavement.

However, Roads Service will treat invasive weeds, such as Japanese Knotweed, found growing on lands within its control, if required, by taking specialist advice from either the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, or specialist contractors.

Residents-only Parking Schemes

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on residents only parking schemes.

(AQW 1640/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it is currently finalising a review of the economic appraisal that was used to calculate the permit charge. The new appraisal will identify a more up to date permit charge. At present, progress on schemes can not resume until this work is complete.

I should further advise that, despite considerable effort by Roads Service, these schemes have encountered difficulties with any attempts at implementation in Belfast being unsuccessful. Whilst acknowledging the potential value of such schemes to residents, I must consider the justification for continuing to pursue such schemes, bearing in mind the time, effort and resource expended to date in trying to introduce them.

As such, I intend to reassess my Department's commitment to implementing such schemes, when I have received the revised economic appraisal.

Water and Sewerage Infrastructure Investments

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the nature and cost of all the water and sewerage infrastructure investments scheduled by NI Water for the Strangford constituency in this financial year.

(AQW 1641/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it does not hold specific details of capital projects by parliamentary constituency. However, it is believed that the capital works programme

for the 2011/12 financial year contains around £7.5 million for projects within the Strangford constituency as detailed below.

Project	Estimated cost in 2011/12 (£000s)
Ballykine Gravity Distribution	57
Newtownards Southern Relief Road	42
Ballynahinch Operational Schemes	107
Carrowreagh Road Dundonald Storm Sewer	33
Ballyhalbert Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	1,508
Portavogie Wastewater Treatment Works Interim Solution	944
Millisle Drainage Area Plan Stage 2	276
Meadowbank Park / Reaville, Dundonald Flood Alleviation	114
Moneyreagh Wastewater Treatment Works	286
Portaferry Wastewater Treatment Works	72
Ballygowan Wastewater Treatment Works	319
Saintfield Wastewater Treatment Works	411
Crossgar Sewage Pumping Station improvements	271
Greyabbey Drainage Area Plan Phase 1	616
South Street, Newtownards Wastewater Pumping Station refurbishment	1,524
Main Street, Cloughey, Pumping main, Foul and Storm Sewer extensions	34
Donaghadee Road, Newtownards, Storm Sewer Extension	43
Copeland Road, Comber, Tank Sewer	119
Old Grand Jury Road, Saintfield, Storm Sewer Extension	30
Millisle Road, Donaghadee, Foul and Storm Sewer Requisition	42
Upper Crescent Wastewater Pumping Station Comber Pumping Main Replacement	123
Killyleagh Wastewater Treatment Works Upgrade	492
Ballydrain Road Comber Foul Sewer Extension	33

Roads Service: Surplus Land

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development what land Roads Service has deemed as surplus to requirements in the Strangford constituency.

(AQW 1642/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service collates details of land for sale on the basis of its four Divisional areas as opposed to on a constituency area basis. However, I am able to provide you with extracts from Eastern and Southern Divisions' databases, which contain details of lands/properties declared surplus by my Department, in or around the Strangford constituency. This land is currently in the process of being disposed of in accordance with the procedures laid down by the Department of

Finance and Personnel's Land and Property Services. The locations of the surplus lands/properties are listed in the following table:

Division	House No	Street	Town	Property Description
Eastern	72	Kingsdale Park	Dundonald	Dwelling
Eastern	4	Grahamsbridge Road	Dundonald	Land
Eastern	132	Ravenswood Park	Belfast	Land
Eastern		Lower Newtownards Road	Belfast	Land
Eastern	278	Comber Road	Belfast	Land
Eastern	276A	Comber Road	Dundonald	Land
Eastern	2	Green Lane	Conlig	Land
Eastern	14	Ballylenaghan Road	Belfast	Land
Eastern		Church Road	Moneyreagh	Land
Eastern	1-31	Comber Road	Dundonald	Land
Eastern	4	Gransha Road Terrace	Dundonald	Land
Southern		Comber Road	Newtownards	Land
Southern		Jubilee Road	Newtownards	Land
Southern	6	Newtown Gardens, Donaghadee Road	Newtownards	Land
Southern	10	Chesterbrook Crescent	Newtownards	Land
Southern		Movilla Road	Newtownards	Land
Southern		Ballycloughan Road	Saintfield	Land
Southern		Frederick Street/ Corporation Street	Newtownards	Land
Southern	199	Belfast Road	Dundonald	Land
Southern	11	Rademon Court	Crossgar	Land
Southern	1	Rademon Court	Crossgar	Land
Southern	4	Saintfield Road	Crossgar	Land

NI Water

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development whether NI Water is equipped to deal with potential severe winter weather conditions.

(AQW 1659/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Following its publication on 3 March 2011, Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has been working to implement the recommendations made in the Report of the Investigations into the Freeze/Thaw incident 2010/11. These recommendations, covering communications, contingency planning, assets, governance and leadership and resilience, are intended to ensure that NIW is better prepared to handle the effects of severe weather conditions similar to those experienced last Christmas. NIW currently plans to have approximately 90% of the short/medium term recommendations complete by December 2011, with the final 10% being completed by June 2012. There are a further ten actions that are of a long term nature and will be completed by 2015.

NIW's response to severe winter weather conditions will be based on its Major Incident Plan (MIP) which has been revised following lessons learnt from last winter. It reflects current water industry best practice and incorporates lessons learned from wider industry events. The MIP aims to provide a fully planned response to all types of emergency. NIW emergency planning also includes a range of contingency plans for specific types of event including severe weather conditions during the winter months. NIW will be testing these before the winter.

Improvements to NIW's arrangements include: staff availability; transport; contractors; fuel; water storage; liaison with third parties; alternative water supplies and telephone communications. In addition, NIW will be launching a winter publicity campaign to help customers prepare for the winter. This will include advice and information on lagging pipes and on dealing with burst pipes.

Severe Winter Weather Conditions

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans are in place to ensure that Roads Service is fully prepared to deal with potential severe winter weather conditions.

(AQW 1660/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Prior to the start of each winter service season, my Department's Roads Service carries out a significant amount of pre-planning to ensure a state of readiness for the coming winter. As well as a number of routine pre-season checks, planning includes ensuring that adequate staffing arrangements are in place, including training for new staff, where required, winter service equipment is in working order and there is an adequate stock of salt.

Salt barns, which are strategically placed in depots throughout Northern Ireland, are normally stocked to hold sufficient quantities of salt to provide the winter service programme for a full season without the need to restock. Following last year's severe weather, Roads Service has reviewed these levels and has increased stocks significantly in order to be best prepared in the event of potential, prolonged wintry weather. If necessary, Roads Service has arrangements in place to supplement stocks of salt during the winter period.

In addition, salt bins or grit piles may be provided for use by the public, on other routes adopted or maintained by Roads Service, which do not qualify for inclusion on the gritting schedule. Roads Service currently provides approximately 4,200 salt bins and 39,500 grit piles on public roads.

You will appreciate there are many roads in Northern Ireland and it is not practical nor would it represent an effective use of resources to salt all of them, given the many other competing demands placed on Roads Service, much of them safety related. Nevertheless, I can assure the Member that Roads Service commits significant resources to its winter service programme. Every night, from the end of October 2011 until the middle of April 2012, Roads Service will have over 300 people on standby ready to salt main roads, helping drivers across Northern Ireland cope with the wintry conditions.

I have also asked Roads Service to work with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), to develop a broad framework of principles which will set out the basis of partnering

arrangements between Roads Service and Councils for the removal of snow and ice from busy town centre footways, during prolonged periods of wintry weather. When finalised, it is hoped that agreements based on the broad framework, specifically tailored for each individual council, can be put in place. I would hope that such arrangements could be agreed before the winter season starts, however, each individual Council will have the final decision on whether or not it signs up to provide this valuable service to the public.

In conclusion, I am confident that my Department's Roads Service will be able to deliver a high standard of service delivery and ensure that Northern Ireland network remains open for business regardless of the prevailing weather conditions.

A6 Dungiven-Derry Dual Carriageway

Mr Ó hÓisín asked the Minister for Regional Development whether the £107m previously identified for the A6 Dungiven-Derry dual carriageway is included in the 2011-15 budget period.

(AQW 1672/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The additional £107m allocated to my Department following the Budget consultation was not wholly assigned to roads schemes. It permitted additional investment in water and sewerage infrastructure, roads and public transport.

Over £60 million of additional capital funding was received for major road projects, predominantly in year four (2014/15) of the budget period. This will be considered for a range of competing priorities.

However, decisions to start schemes in 2014/15 will be dependent on the funding made available beyond the current budget period. Schemes such as the A6 Londonderry to Dungiven dualling will take several years to complete and, I could not give approval for construction to commence unless I have confirmation that the required funding will be in place in the subsequent years.

The funding, beyond the budget period, will become clearer once further work has been completed to develop the third edition of the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland, which I understand is due to conclude later this year.

I have also received numerous requests to meet a wide range of bodies and elected members interested in progressing Strategic Road Improvement schemes across Northern Ireland. I will use these meetings as an opportunity to listen to opinions before forming a view as to the way forward. This will coincide with the work being undertaken to develop the Investment Strategy beyond this budget period.

In the meantime, development work continues on a range of schemes across Northern Ireland which are included in the Strategic Road Improvement Programme. In particular, development work on the A6 Londonderry to Dungiven project has been progressing well and I anticipate that the draft Orders and Environmental Statement will be published later this year, and will potentially lead to a Public Inquiry being held in 2012.

Severe Winter Weather Conditions: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans are in place to deal with any potential severe winter weather conditions in the North Down constituency.

(AQW 1675/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has in place sufficient finance, labour and materials to satisfactorily carry out the Winter Service programme for the incoming winter season of 2011/12.

Although Roads Service has no statutory obligation to salt roads, it does earmark funds to provide a salting service with the aim of helping main road traffic to move safely and freely in wintry conditions, through the removal of snow and the gritting of the salted network across Northern Ireland.

Prior to the start of each winter service season, Roads Service undertakes a significant amount of pre-planning to ensure a state of readiness for the coming winter. As well as a number of routine

pre-season checks, planning incorporates ensuring that adequate staffing arrangements are in place, including training for new staff, where required, there is an adequate supply of salt and winter service equipment is in working order.

It is Roads Service's policy to salt main through routes carrying more than 1,500 vehicles per day and other busy through routes, where there are difficult circumstances such as steep hills, carrying more than 1,000 vehicles per day. In applying the criteria, buses get a higher weighting, for example, a 40 seater bus is counted as 40 vehicles. This policy results in the provision of a salted network of approximately 7,000 km (4,300 miles) covering 28% of roads in Northern Ireland, targeting Roads Service's resources at the busier routes carrying most traffic.

Efforts are also made to ensure that small settlements of more than 100 dwellings have a treated link to the salted network and consideration is given to placing grit piles or salt bins at hills, bends or junctions on roads that are not salted.

In addition, Roads Service has introduced improvements to its operational response around rural schools regularly affected by adverse weather conditions. These improvements have ensured better communications between Roads Service and schools, which experience difficulties, and has allowed Roads Service to provide a more flexible and timely response, as and when road conditions necessitate.

Whilst it is never possible to completely counteract the full forces of nature, based on the information currently available, it is my assessment that Roads Service is well prepared to deal with the incoming winter season.

Following its publication on 3 March 2011, Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has been working to implement the recommendations made in the Report of the Investigations into the Freeze/Thaw incident 2010/11. These recommendations, covering communications, contingency planning, assets, governance and leadership and resilience, are intended to ensure that NIW is better prepared to handle the effects of severe weather conditions similar to those experienced last Christmas. NIW currently plans to have approximately 90% of the short/medium term recommendations complete by December 2011, with the final 10% being completed by June 2012. There are a further ten actions that are of a long term nature and will be completed by 2015.

NIW's response to severe winter weather conditions will be based on its Major Incident Plan (MIP) which has been revised following lessons learnt from last winter. It reflects current water industry best practice and incorporates lessons learned from wider industry events. The MIP aims to provide a fully planned response to all types of emergency. NIW emergency planning also includes a range of contingency plans for specific types of event including severe weather conditions during the winter months. NIW will be testing these before the winter.

Improvements to NIW's arrangements include: staff availability; transport; contractors; fuel; water storage; liaison with third parties; alternative water supplies and telephone communications. In addition, NIW will be launching a winter publicity campaign to help customers prepare for the winter. This will include advice and information on lagging pipes and on dealing with burst pipes.

The Street Works (Northern Ireland) Order 1995: Article 41

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development how many times his Department has exercised its powers under Article 41 of The Street Works (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, as amended by The Street Works (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2007, since the legislation was introduced. **(AQW 1676/11-15)**

Mr Kennedy: My Department's powers under Article 41(3) of The Street Works (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 (the Order) relate to cases where the undertaker has failed to afford reasonable facilities, to my Department's Roads Service, for ascertaining whether its apparatus is maintained to Roads Service satisfaction. I can advise the Member that Roads Service has not found it necessary to exercise these powers.

My Department's powers under Article 41(4) of the Order provide the Street Authority entitlement to execute emergency works needed in the consequence of any failure of the undertaker to maintain their apparatus. The preferred approach and practice in such cases has been to alert the undertaker to any defective apparatus and require the undertaker to remedy the defect within specified timescales, depending on the severity of the defect. A period of two hours is permitted in circumstances of high risk. In 2010/11 Roads Service notified undertakers of over 6,000 cases of defective apparatus, of which some 1,700 were deemed to be high risk.

Where there is felt to be immediate danger, Roads Service may take action to guard the defect by erecting barriers or placing a steel road plate, pending response by the undertaker. However, these occasions are rare, and no records are kept of the numbers of cases.

The Street Works (Northern Ireland) Order 1995: Article 39(2)

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development how many times his Department has exercised its powers under Article 39(2) of The Street Works (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 which states that 'The records shall be kept up to date and shall be kept in such form and manner as may be prescribed', since the legislation was introduced.

(AQW 1677/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Article 39(4) of The Street Works (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 (the Order) makes it an offence for a street works undertaker to fail to comply with his duties under Article 39, including those duties under Article 39(2) as prescribed in The Street Works (Records) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004.

My Department's Roads Service has advised me that it is not aware of any offences committed under Article 39(4) of the Order to date and has not therefore found it necessary to take forward any prosecutions under these powers.

The Street Works (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2007

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development, under The Street Works (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2007, what financial contribution utility companies have made to his Department in each of the last four years for the repair of the roads network as a result of the failure of utility companies to reinstate the roads.

(AQW 1678/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service advises that it does not carry out repairs of the road network as a result of the failure of utility companies to reinstate the roads. Utility companies are required to reinstate the road network to the standards set out in the Specification for the Reinstatement of Openings in Roads (2nd Edition). Where a reinstatement fails to comply, the utility company must carry out remedial works to bring the reinstatement to the required standard.

The Street Works (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and The Street Works (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 do make provision for my Department, either to require a contribution from street works undertakers towards the cost of reconstruction or re-surfacing of a street, or for the street works undertaker to resurface a street, with the Department making a contribution towards the cost. These provisions, or associated regulations, have not been brought into operation and do not apply to cases of failure of utility companies to reinstate the roads.

Spraying of Weeds in North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to ensure that there will be no repeat of the significant delay that occurred in the spraying of weeds on footpaths and roads in the North Down area.

(AQW 1716/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the one year contract for weed control for part of its Eastern Division was not extended to the 2011 season as it was not providing adequate value for money.

Roads Service has advised that there is a lead-in time for developing and awarding contracts of between 8-12 months and in view of the timescales and the costs involved, it decided to bring weed control in the North Down back in-house to be carried out by its internal contractor, Roads Service Direct (RSD).

Unfortunately, given the relatively short notice of this decision, and the need to provide appropriate training to the workforce, weed spraying in some areas fell behind schedule, in spite of the best efforts of Roads Service to keep ahead of demand. However, Roads Service has advised that every effort is being undertaken to catch up on outstanding work now that staff training is complete and new equipment is available.

Roads Service acknowledges that it is late in the season for weed spraying and that some areas will require additional effort to remove large and unsightly weeds, but that work is being prioritised and it is hoped that results of these efforts will be soon evident.

Weed control measures in North Down during the 2012 season will be again be carried out by RSD and it is anticipated that the start up difficulties experienced this year will not reoccur.

Footpath Resurfacing Schemes

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what footpath resurfacing schemes are planned for the Bangor area over the next two years.

(AQW 1717/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that while the normal planned Spring presentation to North Down Borough Council was cancelled due to the timing of the elections earlier this year, the Council was provided with copies of its Spring Report. This Report includes details of resurfacing works programmed for the current financial year and can be viewed at my Department's website at the following address:

<http://applications.drndi.gov.uk/publications/document.asp?docid=21894>

Roads Service officials are currently preparing the Autumn Report, which will include the updated programme for the current financial year. This Report will be presented to the Council on 18 October 2011 and thereafter be available at the above web address.

With regard to next financial year, programmes have yet to be finalised as financial allocations are still to be agreed.

A2 Between Silverstream Banks and Seapark, Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the A2 project between Silverstream Banks and Seapark, Carrickfergus.

(AQW 1721/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I acknowledge the need to undertake improvements to the A2 Shore Road at Greenisland and my Department's Roads Service has, in recent years, progressed the development of this scheme.

A reduction of 40% in the Executive's overall capital funding from the Treasury over the 2011-2015 period, has meant that there are now funding constraints. When competing priorities for the maintenance, management and development of the transport network are taken into consideration, I am, unfortunately, unable at this stage to progress plans to start construction on the A2 Shore Road Greenisland scheme during this budget period.

However, I am determined to ensure that improvements are made to the Strategic Road Network that enhance safety, reduce journey times and provide value for money. On that basis, I intend to consider

the proposed investment across my Department, including the impact of Budget 2010 on the strategic roads programme, and to explore opportunities to bring forward schemes, such as the A2 Shore Road Greenisland scheme.

A2 Between Silverstream Banks and Seapark, Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total amount spent to date on the A2 project between Silverstream Banks and Seapark, Carrickfergus.

(AQW 1722/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the overall expenditure to date on the A2 Shore Road Greenisland scheme, is approximately £16.8 million.

This includes £12 million on property purchased under Planning Blight (Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1981, £4.3 million in Consultancy fees associated with the design and development of the scheme and £0.5 million in advance geotechnical and archaeological surveys.

A2 Between Silverstream Banks and Seapark, Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the daily traffic volume on the A2 between Silverstream Banks and Seapark, Carrickfergus.

(AQW 1723/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the most recent traffic volume information available for the A2 between Silverstream Banks and Seapark, Carrickfergus was collected during 2010. On this section of road, the average daily, week-day, two-way traffic volume, north of Greenisland, is 26,000 vehicles per day, rising to 33,000 vehicles per day south of Greenisland.

Road Surfacing Projects: Carrickfergus

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any road surfacing projects which have been identified for the Carrickfergus Borough Council area over the next three years.

(AQW 1724/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service presented its Spring Report to Carrickfergus Borough Council on 12 May 2011. The report included details of programmes for both footway reconstruction and carriageway resurfacing schemes.

This report can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drni.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtypesresults.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

Northern Ireland Water (NIW) subsequently published proposals for extensive water main renewal across the Borough and this has, unfortunately, necessitated the deferral of the proposed carriageway resurfacing at the A2 Larne Road.

Roads Service plans to present its Autumn Progress Report to Carrickfergus Borough Council on 14 November 2011. As well as providing an update on the progress of schemes, the report will set out details of any changes to the works programmes.

Due to uncertainty surrounding NIW's proposals and future funding levels, it is difficult to prepare a meaningful three year programme at the present time. However, Roads Service will endeavour to develop an indicative three year programme and this will be presented to Carrickfergus Borough Council in due course.

A2 Between Silverstream Banks and Seapark, Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of properties on the A2 between Silverstream Banks and Seapark, Carrickfergus that have been vested by his Department.
(AQW 1759/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, to date, two Statutory Notices relating to the development of the A2 Shore Road Greenisland scheme have been published. These are the Direction Order and the Notice to Proceed. The final Statutory Notice, the Vesting Order, to affect the compulsory purchase of land required for this scheme has not been completed due to funding constraints. Therefore, no properties have been vested on the A2 between Silverstream Banks and Seapark, Carrickfergus.

However, under The Planning Blight (Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1981, Roads Service has been required to purchase a number of properties along the Shore Road, Greenisland. To date, 25 properties have been purchased under Planning Blight Legislation with a further three properties under consideration. The purchase of all properties has been at the owners' request.

A2 Between Silverstream Banks and Seapark, Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of vacant properties along the proposed route of the A2 scheme between Silverstream Banks and Seapark, Carrickfergus.
(AQW 1760/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: To date, my Department's Roads Service has been required to purchase 25 properties along the Shore Road, Greenisland under The Planning Blight (Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. Purchase of a further three properties is currently under consideration. It is important to note that all of these properties have been purchased at the request of their owners.

Of the 25 properties purchased by the Department, 21 are vacant. Seven of the properties purchased are subject to demolition and, to date, four have been demolished. Of the remaining 18 properties, eight are currently being processed for disposal. However, a portion of the gardens belonging to these remaining properties will be retained by the Department as the land will be required for the A2 Shore Road, Greenisland scheme.

I understand that a number of other properties, not owned by the Department, along this section of road are also vacant.

Portavo Reservoir

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the proposed sale of Portavo Reservoir.
(AQW 1761/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that Portavo Reservoir has been declared 'no longer required for future use' and will be disposed of in accordance with the general authorisation given by my Department on 20 March 2007, the terms of NIW's Licence and its Asset Disposal Policy.

At present, the sale of Portavo Reservoir has not been initiated and it has not been placed on NIW's list of assets to be disposed of in 2011/12 or 2012/13.

Reservoirs at Ballysallagh

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his Department's position on the future of the reservoirs at Ballysallagh.
(AQW 1763/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the Ballysallagh Reservoirs have been declared surplus to requirements and can be considered for disposal. However, at present there are no plans to dispose of the reservoirs prior to the 2013/14 financial year.

Sale of Reservoirs

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his Department's policy or position on the sale of reservoirs.

(AQW 1764/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The disposal of land, including reservoirs, owned by NI Water is a matter for the company subject to its regulatory Licence, the general authorisation given by my Department on 20 March 2007 and the company's own Asset Disposal Policy. Amongst other things these require NIW to ensure that it achieves value for money and maintains high standards of propriety. Disposing of assets which are no longer required for future use can help the company to reduce costs which benefits NIW's customers and the taxpayers.

Road Works: Congestion

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the annual cost to the local economy that results from congestion caused by road works.

(AQW 1780/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it has not attempted to estimate the annual cost to the local economy resulting from congestion caused by road works. However, it does try to quantify the impact of delays on specific sections of the road network, when assessing the costs and benefits of proposed major capital works. These are scheme specific assessments and do not provide a basis for assessment of overall congestion costs.

Estimates in relation to the cost of congestion caused by road works in GB vary significantly, with the highest estimate being around 10 times the size of the lowest estimate. However, I understand that in GB, it is considered that traffic congestion caused by works on roads, including those carried out by local road authorities and utility companies, is estimated at only one tenth of total traffic congestion.

Road Works: Utilities

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department charges utility companies for operating on roads during peak times; and if not, would he consider imposing a charge.

(AQW 1781/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it does not charge utility companies for operating on roads during peak times and, at present, there are no plans to introduce such charges.

Pilot schemes were carried out in England between 2002 and 2004. However, I understand that they did not prove to be an effective model for reducing congestion and other disruption caused by utility company street works.

Roads Service endeavours to prevent works taking place during peak times on roads which have been designated as traffic sensitive. Where such work is unavoidable, Roads Service works with utility companies to ensure that the duration and impact of these works is kept to a minimum.

Street Lighting Schemes: Carrickfergus

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any road lighting schemes proposed for the Carrickfergus Borough Council area over the next four years; and the wards in which they will take place.

(AQW 1782/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it does not record information on proposed street lighting schemes by ward area. However, information on completed and proposed street lighting schemes for the current financial year can be found in Roads Service's Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drdni.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

I can advise that the detailed budget for subsequent years has not yet been finalised and it is therefore not possible to provide details of future works programmes at this time.

Street Lighting Schemes: Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the new street lighting schemes that are planned for Bangor in the next two years.

(AQW 1816/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised it has no plans for new street lighting schemes in the North Down Council area within this financial year. However, details of replacement street lighting schemes, proposed for this financial year, are contained with Roads Service's Spring Report to North Down Council. The Report can be viewed on my Department's website at the following address: <http://applications.drdni.gov.uk/publications/document.asp?docid=21894>

The programme for future years is not yet developed and will depend on budget allocations and other priorities at that time.

Transport Policy

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development which groups representing people with disabilities does his Department consult before it formulates transport policy.

(AQW 1821/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: As part of the development of transport policy my Department formally consults with a wide range of groups representing people with disabilities included within its Section 75 consultee list. This includes: Action Mental Health, Alzheimer's Society, Action on Hearing Loss, Asperger's Network, Autism NI, British Deaf Association (Northern Ireland), Carers Northern Ireland, Community Transport Association, Children with Disabilities Strategic Alliance, Disability Action, Down's Syndrome Association, Employers Forum on Disability, MENCAP, Mobilise, NI Association for Mental Health, North West Forum of People with Disabilities, RNIB, Sense NI, The Omnibus Partnership, The Cedar Foundation, The Inclusive Mobility Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC) and the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association.

Where policy consultations relate to specific local areas or to a narrowly defined issue relating to people with disabilities, additional organisations may be included, where appropriate.

Railways: Ballymoney

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development whether Ballymoney will be the passing point for Londonderry trains when services are reduced in January 2012; and if so, whether Ballymoney has the necessary infrastructure to ensure passenger safety.

(AQW 1851/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink has advised that it is not the case that the service changes on the Londonderry line will be implemented in January 2012. However, when these changes do come into force later in 2012, Ballymoney will benefit from a significant increase in service levels to hourly services in each direction. Ballymoney will be the proposed passing point for trains, meaning that both platforms will be in use throughout the day.

From late 2012 access to the down platform (Coleraine direction) will be via a newly constructed, fully accessible footbridge/cycle bridge. During the interim period access to the down platform will be via the temporary footbridge structure currently in place or via the public pathway at the south end of the platforms. An additional gated pathway exists at the north end of the platforms and is available for use but only with staff assistance. Translink has advised that the station is staffed for most of the operational day.

Translink Uniform

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of supplying a Translink uniform to an employee.

(AQW 1852/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink has advised that the cost of a uniform ranges between £180 to £200 depending on the grade of the employee, the function that they undertake and the different items of uniform required for that role. Translink has also advised that it provides uniforms to around 3,700 staff in order to satisfy health and safety requirements and to promote the company with customers. Costs incurred in any one year will depend on the required numbers of uniforms.

Railways: Coleraine to Londonderry

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what impact the reduction in service provision on the Coleraine to Londonderry railway line will have on the employment of signallers; and whether redundancy packages are under consideration.

(AQW 1853/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink has advised that the current planned reduction to rail service provision between Coleraine and Londonderry to complete necessary safety improvement works will have no impact on signallers.

However when the track is fully re-laid and re-signalling work on the Coleraine-Londonderry line is eventually completed (in accordance with the hourly service plan), this will have an impact on signallers.

The Economic Appraisal for this project shows all signalling operations being concentrated in Coleraine cabin. This will result in the signalling functions at Waterside Station, Castlerock and Bann Bridge becoming redundant.

In such circumstances discussions between the organisation and relevant Trade Union officials would take place and in the first instance the normal approach is to seek to implement suitable redeployment for any affected staff. Staff in the North-West are aware of future plans.

Railways: Managers

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of line managers employed by NI Railways and their annual income broken down by salary, bonuses, company car expenses and additional travelling expenses.

(AQW 1854/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer you to the answer given recently to John Dallat, (East Londonderry) AQW 1604/11-15. Translink has advised that there are currently 35 line managers directly employed by NI Railways. This excludes managers who provide services across Translink.

The annual salary cost of these 35 staff is estimated at £39,206 per person. This excludes National Insurance contributions and pension contributions estimated at £10,336 annually.

Translink have indicated that these staff do not receive bonuses.

Of the 35 staff, 10 are provided with cars by virtue of the requirements of their positions. That is, Permanent Way and Signaling Engineers who require access to sites, some of which are remote, and who are permanently on call and need to be readily mobile to attend meetings or carry out inspections. These users are provided with fuel cards and the relevant fuel card costs for the year to date (April-August 2011) are £7,704 (exclusive of VAT).

In relation to travelling expenses, Translink do not capture this information in the manner requested. Therefore these figures could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Railways: Londonderry to Belfast

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount spent on (i) advertising and promoting; and (ii) maintaining the Derry to Belfast Railway Service in each of the last three years. **(AQW 1875/11-15)**

Mr Kennedy:

- (i) The table below shows the amount spent by Translink Northern Ireland Railways to promote local rail travel for the financial years 2008/09, 2009/10 and 2010/11. The table also details spend which is specific to the Belfast to Londonderry inter-city service.

	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
	£000's	£000's	£000's
NI Railways local rail marketing spend	98,386	176,781	138,167
NI Railways Londonderry line- specific marketing spend	-	15,000	1,581

Marketing spend includes tactical advertising campaigns, promotional publications and direct mail. Advertising campaigns cover all local lines, including the Londonderry Line service. Tactical campaigns strategically target each of the rail corridors including the Londonderry Line. The annual direct mail targets households close to rail stations on each of the lines.

The marketing activity for the Belfast to Londonderry inter-city service in September / October 2009/10 consisted of an advertising campaign aimed at encouraging rail users back to the train following the line closure due to the track upgrade work (30 March–28 June 2009). In 2010/11 a tourism publication was produced promoting “One of the World’s Great Railway Journeys”, Coleraine – Londonderry.

Specific marketing activity for the Belfast to Londonderry rail service has been greater than that of the other local lines.

- (ii) The Belfast to Londonderry railway service is operated by the Class 3000 fleet. The fleet operates throughout the NI Railways network. Individual trains are not allocated to specific services thus it is not possible to provide details of fleet maintenance for the Belfast to Londonderry service in isolation.

Railways: Coleraine to Londonderry

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Regional Development why the cost of the upgrade of the Coleraine to Derry railway line has risen substantially over the past three years. **(AQW 1930/11-15)**

Mr Kennedy: Translink advice that the cost of the upgrade has not risen substantially over the last 3 years.

During the Inception Stage of this project, Translink produced its Project Identification Document. This report estimated the cost of the project at £65.3m, at 2007 prices. It also estimated the cost at 2012 prices as £73.2m.

A Feasibility Study was carried out during the period of January 2009 to March 2010. This looked at the project in greater detail than had been the case at Inception Stage. After the Feasibility Study, an Economic Appraisal was carried out by KPMG. The appraisal recommended proceeding with Option 3a, at an estimated cost of £75m, which included an Optimism Bias of £12.6m.

Railways: Coleraine to Londonderry

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Regional Development whether farmers will be compensated for the closure of accommodation crossings while the upgrade to the Coleraine to Derry railway line takes place.

(AQW 1932/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink assure me that the accommodation crossings will not be closed during the upgrade of the line. The contractor and Translink will work together to ensure that farmers will always have access over the accommodation crossings. The contractor will have to remove the permanent crossing surface at the crossings at certain stages during the works and temporary crossing surfaces will be provided at those stages. The contractor will engage with each farmer during programming and planning of works at his/her accommodation crossing and ensure that the farmer is not disadvantaged during the project. Thus farmers will not be compensated for closure of accommodation crossings.

DRD: Independent Review Team

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the meetings his predecessor held between 23 February and 25 February 2010 in relation to the Independent Review Team, including who was in attendance and whether minutes were taken.

(AQW 2023/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: It is not appropriate for me to answer in relation to any discussions my predecessor may or may not have had on this issue in the course of the previous mandate.

Department for Social Development

Housing Executive: Emergency Maintenance

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development whether contingency plans have been made to provide emergency maintenance for Housing Executive properties if there are severe weather conditions this winter.

(AQW 1668/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): A considerable amount of work has been undertaken to ensure that both Housing Executive staff and their Contractors will be in a position to respond effectively and speedily if there are severe weather conditions this winter.

The Housing Executive has advised that the following plans have been put in place:

- Enhanced their pool of staff resources willing and able to respond to an emergency across the province;
- Reviewed the “triggers” which provide pre warning of a potential emergency-such as volume of calls coming in to their Customer Services Units and the number of calls not being answered
- Reviewed all emergency plans at District, Area and Central level and put in place a formal annual review procedure;
- Reviewed all of the All Trades and Heating Contractor Emergency/ Contingency plans and put in place a formal annual review procedure;
- Put in place priority call handling (“silver numbers”) for use by emergency services, public representatives and community representatives;

- Carried out tests of plans and procedures in three Housing Executive Areas, involving Area and District staff, Contractors and Community Representatives; these were successful but all involved learned small lessons from putting the theory into practice.
- Identified a range of technical improvements (particularly in relation to boilers/heating) and included these in ongoing work, for example, relocating gas condensate pipes internally, providing a frost stat (which will trigger the pump to circulate water around the system) at each new oil heating installation, etc;
- Agreed a menu of services including, sharing mobile contact numbers, opening Community facilities, assisting in identifying those who might be vulnerable, which community groups might provide - to be agreed locally (at District Office level) during September;
- Developed a series of information pages which can be activated at short notice on their web, dependant on the type of emergency, to provide clear advice and guidance to tenants.

DSD: Capital Projects, East Antrim

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Social Development what capital projects his Department has planned for the East Antrim constituency in each of the next five years.

(AQW 1670/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Over the course of the next five years, my Department has included capital investment projects in its urban regeneration programme for East Antrim as follows:

ReStore Programme in Larne town centre - 2011/12

Public Realm Scheme Dunluce Street and Point Street, Larne – 2011/12

Public Realm Scheme in Carrickfergus – 2012/13

ReStore Programme in Carrickfergus – 2013/14

Public Realm Scheme in Larne town centre – 2014/15

In addition, my Department has included a number of capital investment Housing projects for East Antrim as follows:

Eden, Carrickfergus, Phase 3B, 22 units – 2011/12

Ards Drive, Monkstown, Newtownabbey, 12 units – 2011/12

Craigyhill, Larne, 31 units – 2012/13

Taylors Avenue, Carrickfergus, 24 units – 2012/13

A further scheme at Sunnylands/Sunnylands Grove, Carrickfergus is currently undergoing initial feasibility investigations.

It should be noted that these schemes are all subject to the necessary approval processes being completed.

Social Housing: Loughview Estate, Holywood

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development at what stage are the plans for new builds in the Loughview Estate, Holywood.

(AQW 1690/11-15)

Mr McCausland: A Housing Association will be nominated to take this new scheme forward in the coming weeks. They will be expected to appoint their own design team who will need to engage with the local community before submitting a formal planning application for the site.

I anticipate that subject to that planning approval, work could start during the next financial year (2012/13) and am pleased to confirm the necessary funding has already been committed to allow that scheme to commence at that time.

Community House: Loughview Estate, Holywood

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development if there are any plans for a new community house in the Loughview Estate, Holywood.

(AQW 1691/11-15)

Mr McCausland: There are no current plans for the provision of a new community house in the Loughview area and taking into account the demand for housing within the locality it is unlikely that any such request would be accommodated by a Housing Association in West Green.

Social Housing: North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what housing schemes are planned for the North Down area in the next two years.

(AQW 1692/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that the following schemes are in the Social Housing Development Programme for the current financial year in the North Down area:-

Bloomfield Road/South Circular Road, Bangor	43 dwellings	(General Needs)
Clifton Special Care School, Old Belfast Road Bangor (Surplus lands)	53 dwellings	(General Needs)
Primacy Road, Bangor	13 dwellings	(General Needs)

Information on 2012/13 is not available as the programme for that year has not been approved yet.

Housing Estates with Economic and Social Problems

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what plans there are for housing estates that fall outside the criteria for Neighbourhood Renewal, Small Pockets of Deprivation and Areas at Risk, but which still have economic and social problems.

(AQW 1718/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive is currently involved in the Alpha Programme which covers Belfast, Lisburn and South Antrim only. This environmental grants programme invites community groups who wish to transform their local surroundings to apply for a grant and is funded through Landfill Tax Credits generated from the Mullaghglass landfill site operated by Alpha Resource Management.

The Housing Executive has a representative on the decision making panel that determines which applications qualify. Also represented are Alpha Resource Management, Groundwork NI, Belfast City Council and Lisburn City Council. The panel is chaired by an independent Chairperson.

Depending on the nature of each individual project a grant of between £10,000 and £50,000 is available and can be allocated under one of two categories: Community-based projects and Biodiversity. The criteria for successful projects are:

- Positive environmental impact;
- Targets disadvantaged groups;
- Community support and involvement;
- Sustainability after initial funding;
- Complement other local initiatives;

To date 35 projects have received total funding of over £1 million.

DSD: Community Based Projects, Carrickfergus

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Social Development which community based projects in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area currently receive funding from his Department.

(AQW 1725/11-15)

Mr McCausland: DSD currently provide funding to community based projects in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area through both the Community Support Programme and the Community Investment Fund.

Projects funded through the Community Support Programme which is run in partnership and administered by the local Council include;

- Glenfield PAKT
- Whitehead Community Association
- Greenisland Community Council
- Windmill and Minorica Drive Assoc.
- Woodburn Residents Association
- Carrickfergus Neighbourhood Development Group
- Carrickfergus Community Forum
- Carrickfergus Women's Forum
- Carrickfergus Drug & Alcohol Advisory Group.
- Glenfield Residents Association
- Mount Vernon Community Development Group
- CITHRAH
- Carrick YMCA - Woodburn PAKT
- Carrickfergus Women's Aid
- Pregnancy Resource Centre
- Shopmobility

One local organisation, Carrickfergus Community Forum, is funded through the Community Investment Fund programme to provide sub-regional support to voluntary and community organisations across the local Council area.

Cross-community Projects: East Antrim

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the level of funding allocated to cross-community projects in the East Antrim area in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1726/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive delivers neighbourhood renewal funding through the DSD Small Pockets of Deprivation programme to three areas in the East Antrim constituency - Greenisland estate, Sunnylands estate in Carrickfergus and Larne town centre areas. The Small Pockets of Deprivation Programme along with other programmes like Areas at Risk is often used to build capacity and begin to address inter and intra community relations. The Craigyhill/Antiville, Seacourt and Ferris Park areas of Larne have been included in the Areas at Risk programme and although funding is not specifically targeted to Cross Community projects, such activities are encouraged.

The Voluntary & Community Unit, through its Community Support Programme, works in partnership with local Councils to develop communities. The East Antrim constituency covers 3 district council areas, namely Larne, Carrickfergus and part of Newtownabbey. Two of these councils, namely Newtownabbey

and Carrickfergus Borough Councils have allocated DSD community support programme monies to cross community projects and details are included in the table below.

The table also includes details of funding through the Voluntary & Community Unit's Community Investment Fund Programme to Carrickfergus Community Forum and Larne Community Development Programme whose catchment areas are in the East Antrim Constituency. Whilst this programme's emphasis is on building cohesive communities, again inter and intra community initiatives would be supported as part of the overall intervention.

The table below sets out funding details for the above programmes.

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Small Pockets of Deprivation	£115,052	£60,365	£53,693
Areas at Risk	£49,042.08	£66,258.10	£117,748.53
Community Support Programme	£99,792.25	£120,852.02	not yet finalised
Community Investment Fund	£117,500	£112,143	£111,021

Community Investment Fund

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development when he will announce his decision on the applications to the Community Investment Fund.

(AQW 1808/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Applications have been received by the Department's Voluntary Community Unit from the 34 individual organisations currently funded under the Community Investment Fund programme to support sub-regional and local voluntary and community sector organisations. These applications are currently being assessed through the normal system of economic appraisals. On completion of this process, the Department will be in a better position to advise, but it is anticipated that funding decisions for 2012 to 2013 will be communicated to individual organisations in January 2012 at the latest

Boarded Up Houses

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development how many houses have been boarded up and have been unoccupied for six months or more.

(AQW 1812/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I assume that the Member is referring to social housing and the table below details those houses which have been boarded up and have been unoccupied for six months or more.

NIHE	795
Housing Associations	102
Total	897

DSD: Capital Projects, North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what capital projects his Department has planned for the North Down constituency in each of the next five years.

(AQW 1818/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Over the course of the next five years (subject to funding), my Department has included capital projects in its urban regeneration programme for North Down as follows:

Town Centre Regeneration

- Public Realm Scheme in Bangor during 2013/14 and 2014/15
- Public Realm Scheme in Holywood during 2014/15
- Public Realm Scheme in Donaghadee during 2014/15
- Town Centre Revitalisation Scheme in Bangor during 2014/15
- Neighbourhood Renewal
- The second phase of the Kilcooley Allotments project during 2012/13
- Two further projects, a Multi Functional Centre and a 3G football are currently undergoing initial feasibility investigations.
- In addition, my Department has included a number of capital investment Housing projects for North Down as follows:

Social Housing Development Programme – 2011/12

- Bloomfield Road/South Circular Road, Bangor – 43 dwellings
- Clifton Special Care School, Old Belfast Road, Bangor - 53 dwellings
- Primacy Road, Bangor – 13 dwellings
- Information beyond 2011/12 is not available as the programme has not been approved yet

Environmental Schemes – 2013/14

- Clanmorris, Bangor
- Lisnabreen, Bangor
- Rathgill Zone 6, Bangor
- Rathgill Zones 4 & 5, Bangor
- Breezemont, Bangor
- Bloomfield, Bangor
- Clandeboye Road, Bangor
- Kilcooley Zone 3, Bangor

There are no other capital schemes programmed for North Down beyond 2013/14.

It should be noted that these schemes are all subject to the necessary approval processes being completed.

Lone Pensioner Allowance

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of claims for Lone Pensioner Allowance in each constituency in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1819/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested because the Housing Executive does not routinely collate statistical data by parliamentary constituency. However, the table attached gives the details by Housing Executive area.

Belfast Area	08/09	09/10	10/11
	755	914	714
Total	755	914	714

South East Area	08/09	09/10	10/11
Bangor	291	352	284
Newtownards	220	270	212
Castlereagh	223	285	220
Lisburn	319	384	301
Poleglass	12	23	13
Downpatrick	148	179	134
Total	1213	1493	1164

South Area	08/09	09/10	10/11
Banbridge	116	141	113
Newry	134	143	129
Armagh	132	153	122
Lurgan	130	152	129
Portadown	94	119	95
Total	606	708	588

North East Area	08/09	09/10	10/11
Ballymena	215	244	196
Antrim	125	136	119
Newtownabbey 1 & 2	253	332	242
Carrickfergus	156	201	153
Larne	109	139	103
Ballycastle	40	51	41
Ballymoney	63	75	66
Coleraine	196	222	196
Total	1157	1400	1116

West Area	08/09	09/10	10/11
Londonderry	152	198	148
Limavady	40	52	37
Magherafelt	53	68	48
Strabane	41	57	38
Total	286	375	271

Omagh Area	08/09	09/10	10/11
Omagh	75	87	78

Omagh Area	08/09	09/10	10/11
Cookstown	40	55	42
Dungannon	76	87	71
Fermanagh	126	129	103
Total	317	358	294

Asbestos Material in Homes

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to assist householders who detect asbestos material in their homes when carrying out vital maintenance improvements relating to energy conservation, the installation of new boilers and other works to reduce fuel poverty.

(AQW 1876/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that in relation to energy conservation under the Warm Homes Scheme provisions, there are regulations which enable scheme managers to include the removal of asbestos products which are impacting upon the energy conservation works being undertaken. It should be stressed that the existence of asbestos products does not necessarily mean that they require to be removed. Where such products are identified, scheme managers undertake an assessment of the type and condition of the asbestos before determining whether it should be removed or not.

With regards to the boiler replacement scheme I would advise that an allowance of up to £1,500 is allowed towards the replacement of the inefficient boiler. In the situation where defective asbestos products have been identified which require removal, any costs involved in its removal cannot be considered as part of the replacement boiler. It is the responsibility of the individual householder to fund any costs associated with asbestos removal.

In the normal working of schemes, or through the programmed inspection of its stock, the Housing Executive becomes aware of the presence of asbestos in some of its properties. While in many cases the appropriate response is to leave the asbestos undisturbed as it presents little risk, in some instances, its removal can be recommended and the appropriate arrangements are made via a specialist contractor.

Employment

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are living with a long-term condition which restricted their ability to work full-time or part-time in 2010/11.

(AQW 1915/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department does not hold this information.

Jobseeker's Allowance: East Antrim

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Social Development how many people in the East Antrim area received Job Seekers Allowance in each of the last four years.

(AQW 1920/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information requested is set out in the table below. The figures quoted show the number of people in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance at the dates of extract for the East Antrim Parliamentary Constituency.

Parliamentary Constituency	Mar-08	Mar-09	Mar-10	Mar-11
East Antrim	900	1,909	2,374	2,315

Housing Executive: Flats in Suffolk Road, Belfast

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development whether the Housing Executive plans to upgrade the flats in Suffolk Road, Belfast.

(AQW 1934/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that the flats at Suffolk Road, Belfast are included in a window replacement scheme which is due to start this month. The scheme will involve work to 216 properties at an estimated cost of £493,000. The flats are also included in a heating replacement scheme provisionally programmed to start in November 2011 subject to the availability of finance.

Fuel Costs

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development whether his Department will work with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to address the problem of rising fuel costs and introduce a social price support scheme for vulnerable and disadvantaged older people.

(AQW 1954/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My department launched its new fuel poverty strategy in April 2011 entitled 'Warmer Healthier Homes'. This strategy places significant emphasis on the partnership approach required to tackle fuel poverty and I believe no one government department or organisation can do this singlehandedly. My department is committed to working, not just with Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, but with all government departments and the wider energy and voluntary sector to target those most in need. In our strategy we reaffirm our commitment to continue to explore options for the introduction of a social tariff.

Mortgage Payments

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what assistance his Department can offer to people who have lost their jobs and cannot afford to pay their mortgages.

(AQW 1981/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Anyone who thinks they are in danger of losing their home due to debt secured on it should seek advice immediately. During the summer, I launched the contracted Mortgage Debt Advice Service; this has increased the level of advice available to people experiencing difficulty making mortgage payments. The extended Service now includes an online advisor and evening opening on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The specialised service is preventing, where possible, people here from becoming homeless as a consequence of housing related debt.

The Northern Ireland Social Security Agency provides financial assistance to meet payments of mortgage interest costs where a claim is made to Income Support, income-based Jobseekers Allowance or income-related Employment and Support Allowance. Customers must serve a qualifying period of 13 weeks before they are entitled to any help with mortgage costs and it is limited to the first £200,000 of the mortgage owing. The current Standard Mortgage Interest rate, 3.63%, is used to determine the amount payable to the mortgage lender.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Internet Speed and the Phone System in Parliament Buildings

Mr Dickson asked the Assembly Commission what plans are currently in place to upgrade (i) internet speed; and (ii) the phone system in Parliament Buildings.

(AQW 1667/11-15)

Mr McElduff (The Representative of the Assembly Commission):

- (i) The Assembly Commission recently procured an independent internet connection for use by Assembly Members, Party staff and Secretariat staff on Assembly business installed in March

2011. The 20 Mbps synchronous connection is performing optimally with no delays or congestion detected.

If you are experiencing difficulties accessing a specific website or using a specific piece of Assembly provided equipment please contact the IS Service desk (028 905 21000), the Head of the Information Systems Office or the Director of Information and Outreach, who will be happy to assist.

- (ii) At present there are no plans to upgrade the telephone system in Parliament Buildings. However, it is likely that the Assembly will move towards modernising / upgrading the existing system with a view to taking advantage of modern ICT technologies in the near future. This will of course be dependent upon future work schedules and the availability of financial resources.

Lower East Car Park at Parliament Buildings

Mr Kinahan asked the Assembly Commission to detail (i) the works that were carried out on the Lower East car park at Parliament Buildings during summer 2011; (ii) the number of spaces that were added to the car park; and (iii) how this will affect the number of cars that previously parked along the northern part of the car park.

(AQW 2000/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): During the summer recess the Assembly Commission completed a programme of construction work in an attempt to ease the ongoing difficulties with parking, particularly on Sitting days.

This included some minor improvements to the existing Lower East Car Park; however, the main element of the work was the creation of an additional overflow car park facility. The overflow car park provides an additional 42 parking spaces which will significantly reduce the need to park on the roadways of the estate.

The work to the Lower East Car Park consisted mainly of rationalising the previous layout in order to prevent parking in an unsafe manner which often resulted in cars being 'blocked in'. This was a particular problem at the northern end of the car park and the revised layout will help to eradicate such issues.

In total the revised layout does also provide 2 additional spaces. It had been anticipated that further additional spaces could be created in this car park but difficulties associated with existing underground services meant that was not financially viable.

The Lower East Car Park and the new overflow facility will be managed by Assembly Security staff, Monday to Thursday during Assembly term time, and those staff will be on hand to ensure that the parking space available is used as efficiently as possible, and that inconvenience and obstruction is minimised or avoided.

Initial feedback from car park users in relation to these new arrangements has been positive and Facilities Directorate staff will continue to liaise with DFP colleagues in an effort to identify further improvements where possible.

Car Parking in and Around Parliament Buildings

Mr Kinahan asked the Assembly Commission to what extent have they have resolved the issue of inadequate car parking in and around Parliament Buildings; and for its assessment of whether there are adequate car parking facilities for Assembly (i) staff; and (ii) visitors.

(AQW 2001/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly Commission fully recognises the difficulties experienced in parking within the car parks, particularly on Sitting days.

During the summer recess period, some works were carried out within the Lower East Car Park and a new overflow car park was also created adjacent to existing car park, for use by Assembly staff and visitors (it is not currently possible to differentiate between Assembly staff and visitors using

the car parks). These measures have provided a combined additional 44 parking spaces, and whilst it is anticipated that this will go a significant way towards resolving the problems experienced, it will nonetheless still be necessary for some persons to continue to park on Prince of Wales and Massey Avenues for the foreseeable future.

The Lower East and overspill car parks will continue to be managed by Assembly Security staff, Monday to Thursday during Assembly term time, and those staff will be on hand to ensure that the parking space available is used as efficiently as possible, and that inconvenience and obstruction is minimised or avoided.

Whilst initial feedback from car park users in relation to these new arrangements appears positive, this will be kept under review, and Facilities Directorate staff will continue to liaise with DFP colleagues in an effort to identify further improvements if possible.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 30 September 2011

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Ministerial Subcommittee on Children and Young People

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) how often the Ministerial Sub-group on Children and Young People met during the 2010/11 Assembly session; and (ii) to detail its forward work programme for 2011/12.

(AQW 1739/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr O'Dowd (The First Minister and the Acting deputy First Minister): The Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People met on two occasions during the 2010/11 Assembly session: 29th June 2010 and 2nd March 2011.

We will shortly be convening another meeting of the Ministerial Sub-Committee to discuss how we progress work in order to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people, in line with our joint commitments under the overarching Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). A key focus of this discussion will be how we can best integrate and streamline efforts across all departments to ensure maximum impact on priority issues in relation to children and young people. This will help inform the role and focus of the Ministerial Sub-Committee in driving these key issues forward.

OFMDFM: Arm's-length Bodies

Mr Spratt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the cost to their Department of its arm's-length bodies in each of the last two years.

(AQW 1949/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr O'Dowd: As at 31 March 2011, OFMDFM sponsored seven Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) and three other Arms Length Bodies (ALBs). The cost of funding OFMDFM's ALBs in 2009/10 was £29.2m and in 2010/11 was £28.4m, as outlined in the table below.

The grant-in-aid funding of a departmental Arms Length Body relates to the total running costs of the body, and includes programme expenditure by that body, in addition to its staffing, overhead and operating costs.

OFMDFM GRANT-IN-AID FUNDING OF ARMS LENGTH BODIES IN 2009/10 AND 2010/11

OFMDFM Sponsored Body	2009/10 £'000	2010/11 £'000
NDPBs:		
The Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland	2,883	657
Equality Commission for Northern Ireland	6,980	6,900
Strategic Investment Board	7,074	6,360

OFMDFM Sponsored Body	2009/10 £'000	2010/11 £'000
Ilex Urban Regeneration Company	1,780	2,406
The Commissioner for Children and Young People for Northern Ireland	1,838	1,599
The Commission for Victims and Survivors for Northern Ireland	1,264	1,126
Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission	N/A	1,284 ¹
NDPB Total	21,819	20,332
ALBs		
Community Relations Council for Northern Ireland	3,534	3,412
Northern Ireland Memorial Fund	3,575	4,441
Sustainable Development Commission	308	246
ALB Total	7,417	8,099
Grand Total	29,236	28,431

- 1 The Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission (NIJAC) was established on 15 June 2005 under the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 as amended by the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2004. On the devolution of policing and justice powers in April 2010, sponsorship of NIJAC transferred to OFMDFM. Consequently, no funding costs were incurred by OFMDFM with respect to NIJAC for 2009/10.

The United Kingdom Permanent Representation to the European Union

Mr Kinahan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will consider appointing an additional representative to the office of The United Kingdom Permanent Representation to the European Union to provide a greater collaboration between the European bodies and the Department of the Environment and the Department for Regional Development.

(AQW 2016/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr O'Dowd: The Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) regularly considers appropriate opportunities for secondments to the European institutions including the UK Permanent Representation (UKREP) to the European Union (EU). A central budget has been created to finance secondments for Northern Ireland officials to the EU, targeted at those policy areas agreed by the interdepartmental "Barroso Taskforce Working Group" as a priority in relation to Northern Ireland interests.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has responsibility for appointing staff to work in UKREP. Competitions for vacant posts are run on a regular basis and civil servants from Northern Ireland are eligible to apply for many of these posts. In addition to their normal recruitment procedures, UKREP is open to the secondment of staff from the NICS (where the NICS retains responsibility for the salary and allowances of the individuals concerned).

One civil servant from Northern Ireland is currently working in the Regions and Agriculture section of the UK Representation to the EU.

The Office of the Northern Ireland Executive is in discussions about the possible placement of a member of the NICS in UKREP to support the representation in Regional Policy.

Work is also underway to offer four secondment opportunities to support the work of the "Barroso Northern Ireland Taskforce". One opportunity is available in each of the following agreed thematic group policy areas – Competitiveness and Employment; Innovation and Technology; Social Cohesion; and

Climate Change and Energy. It is envisaged that these 'desk officer' posts will increase the linkages between NICS Departments and European Bodies.

Attorney General

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many times since taking up office the Attorney General has given (i) oral; and (ii) written advice to Departments.

(AQW 2247/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr O'Dowd: The Attorney General for Northern Ireland (AGNI) discharges his functions independently of government. OFMDFM holds sponsorship responsibility for the Office of the AGNI but has no locus in the statutory functions of the Attorney General.

Attorney General

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many times, since taking up office, the Attorney General has (i) attended meetings of the Executive; and (ii) met with each Minister.

(AQW 2248/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr O'Dowd: It is not our practice to disclose details of Executive business. The content of Executive papers and all aspects of Executive business are confidential.

Legislative Programme

Ms Ritchie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the legislative programme for each Department for the current Assembly session.

(AQW 2285/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr O'Dowd: We are currently considering how Executive Ministers' legislative intentions for this session can best be conveyed to the Assembly at a time and in a way most helpful to the conduct of its business, and we will be writing in due course to the Speaker.

Ministerial Subcommittee for Children and Young People

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) when the last meeting of the Ministerial Sub-committee for Children and Young People took place; and (ii) when is the next meeting due to take place.

(AQW 2344/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr O'Dowd: The last meeting of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People took place on 2 March 2011.

Junior Ministers will shortly be convening another meeting of the Ministerial Sub-Committee to discuss how we progress work in order to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people, in line with our joint commitments under the overarching Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Programme for Government 2011-15

Ms Ritchie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the Programme for Government 2011-2015 will be (i) completed; and (ii) published for consultation.

(AQW 2361/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr O'Dowd: A draft of the Programme for Government was given to Ministers and party leaders last week. This draft was the culmination of several months of 'behind the scenes' work by both Ministers and officials, who have canvassed views from, and listened to the opinions of, a wide range of stakeholders and sectoral representatives.

We are of the view that much more work is needed to improve the current draft and that is why we wanted to share it with party leaders who, we hope, will bring it to their respective parties and come back to us with their own ideas.

The document has also been circulated around departments again for further comment and input.

We intend to bring a revised copy of the PfG to the Executive meeting on 6 October, with a view to issuing it for a 12-week public consultation as soon as possible thereafter. Following conclusion of the consultation period, we would anticipate publishing the new Programme for Government within a matter of weeks.

Of course, our capacity to do this is, to a great extent, determined by the co-operation shown by departments and Ministers and political parties in producing and agreeing a final draft for public consultation.

We hope you find this answer helpful

Budget Review Group

Mr Kinahan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the Budget Review Group will bring recommendations regarding existing arm's-length bodies to the Executive; and whether any recommendations will be made on the potential rationalisation of these bodies.

(AQW 2390/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr O'Dowd: The responses received from departments on the Review of Arms Length Bodies are being analysed. Following this, we intend to bring a paper to a future meeting of the Budget Review Group (BRG) and the views of the Group will inform the recommendations which we, as joint chairs of BRG, ultimately bring to the Executive.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Rural Development Programme: Local Action Groups

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development at what percentage level of internal audit of their projects are each of the Local Action Groups (LAG) in the Rural Development Programme; and whether she has identified any areas which could reduce the level of audit in each LAG.

(AQW 1834/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): DARD Internal Audit in accordance with Commission Regulation 885/2006: Annex 1 para 4 (B) has a 5 year risk-based audit strategy which delivers a balanced assurance to the DARD Principal Accounting Officer, the Director of the DARD Paying Agency, the NIAO in its role as Certifying Body for the Paying Agency and the EC on the adequacy and effectiveness of the controls operating in relation to the administration of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

The 1st scheduled review of Axis 3 Measures (LEADER - Quality of life in Rural Areas and Diversification of the Rural economy - there are 6 Measures under this Axis) was scheduled and completed in 2010/2011.

In May 2010 when the audit testing sample was selected for the 2010/2011 review, only 3 of the 7 Joint Council Committees (JCCs) had made payments to projects. Three JCCs had made payments under Measures 3.1, 3.2 and one JCC had made a payment under Measure 3.3. No payments had been made under Measures 3.4 – 3.6.

The following samples were selected for testing within the JCCs under each measure:

Measure 3.1:

- 1 JCC - 5 projects had received payments from which 1 was selected i.e. 20%;

- 1 JCC - 5 projects had received payments from which 1 was selected i.e. 20%;
- 1 JCC - 4 projects had received payments from which 1 was selected i.e. 25%.

Measure 3.2:

- 1 JCC - 5 projects had received payments from which 1 was selected i.e. 20%;
- 1 JCC - 7 projects had received payments from which 1 was selected i.e. 14%;
- 1 JCC - 9 projects had received payments from which 2 were selected i.e. 22%.

Measure 3.3:

- Only 1 JCC had made a payment to a project under this measure therefore this 1 project was selected i.e. 100%.

Audit test samples must be representative to enable effective analysis and conclusion. Because of the small population i.e. the number of projects and related payments; the test sample is unavoidably higher in percentage terms as a consequence. The risk factors used for selection related to projects with the highest spend and those which had not been subject to a DARD EU Verification Check. If the test population had been larger i.e. more projects and payments the percentage selected for testing would have been significantly smaller, usually in the region of 5%, depending on the numbers and related testing practicalities.

A relatively short period of time was spent testing at each JCC to ensure that minimal disruption was caused to normal business.

Internal Audit is required to formally follow-up all recommendations. Internal Audit is currently following-up recommendations raised within the 2010/2011 audit report. This may involve limited testing at each JCC.

All Axis 3 measures are scheduled for review at least once over the 5-year period of the Internal Audit Strategy. The need for either additional or reduced coverage will depend on a number of factors including the results of previous Internal Audit reviews; the effective implementation of previous audit recommendations; DARD Corporate Risk Priorities; and the results from other internal (DARD) and external assurance providers. The Audit Strategy and related annual plans will be reviewed on an annual basis by the DARD Corporate Governance and Audit Committee.

Rural Development Programme

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of Rural Development Programme project funding applications which have been withdrawn after receiving approval, broken down by Local Action Group or Joint Council Committee cluster; and for the value of each of these projects and the reasons given for their withdrawal.

(AQW 1836/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Table 1 below details the information you have requested in a summarised format. As regards the reasons these are many and varied and are covered in table 2.

Table 1 Application Status Data						
	Terminated		Withdrawn		Total Apps	Total Sum of Grant Awarded
DA Cluster	Total Apps	Sum of Grant Awarded	Total Apps	Sum of Grant Awarded		
ARC NW	29	£764,146	8	£132,541	37	£896,687.56

	Terminated		Withdrawn		Total Apps	Total Sum of Grant Awarded
DA Cluster	Total Apps	Sum of Grant Awarded	Total Apps	Sum of Grant Awarded		
DRAP	3	£61,115	7	£134,061	10	£195,176.96
GROW	4	£42,159			4	£42,159.08
LRP	5	£81,205	2	£44,855	7	£126,060.00
NER	24	£435,823	15	£283,963	39	£719,787.19
SOAR	13	£269,927	6	£94,602	19	£364,530.24
SWARD	27	£674,174	10	£246,225	37	£920,399.08
Grand Total	105	£2,328,551	48	£936,248	153	£3,264,800.11

TABLE 2 REASONS FOR WITHDRAWING

Reason	Number
Wrong Measure	11
Withdrawn/terminated by cluster	22
Withdrawn by applicant	39
Economy	12
Lack of match funding	13
Project no longer viable	15
Force majeure	8
Ineligible	7
Cant comply with terms & conditions	12
Financial problems	6
Bureaucracy	3
State aid rules	2
Planning	1
Other	2
Total	153

Rose Energy Power Plant, Glenavy

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the impact on the poultry industry of the delay in the granting of planning approval for the Rose Energy Biomass Power Plant development at Glenavy.

(AQW 1848/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Market demand for poultry products is forecast to increase and this provides potential to expand. In order to maintain existing production and to facilitate future expansion in the north of Ireland, the poultry industry needs reliable and sustainable disposal routes for poultry litter.

The majority of poultry litter produced here is currently land spread as an organic fertiliser. However, the local poultry industry is experiencing difficulty in finding suitable land as a spreading outlet for poultry litter. It is also recognised that land spreading of poultry litter here is not sustainable in the long term at current levels. This is due to its high phosphorus content, the enriched phosphorus status of local soils and the resulting impact of excess phosphorus on water quality.

The industry has reported that the delay in planning approval for the Rose Energy project has created uncertainty over future disposal of poultry litter.

Agricultural Shows and Country Fairs

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the importance of agricultural shows and country fairs; and what her Department has done to promote and assist these events over the last twelve months.

(AQW 1850/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I fully recognise the contribution made by Agricultural Shows and Country Fairs to the agri-food industry and rural communities. I am very aware that agricultural shows are an integral part of the fabric of rural life, giving rural communities a focal point and encouraging interest in farming amongst young people and the general public.

I have attended and promoted a number of shows this year, meeting with both the livestock and trade exhibitors, and other visitors to the events. During my time as Minister, I hope to get the opportunity to visit each of the local Shows.

My Department has provided some financial support to all of the agricultural shows held in the north this year. In addition, DARD has staged advisory exhibitions featuring the Rural Development Programme, at eight of these shows this year, hired trade space and taken advertisements in some of the Show catalogues. DARD funding from the Regional Food Programme has also enabled some shows to mount exhibitions that showcase artisan food producers and quality local produce to the visitors.

Flood Bank: The Meadows, Ballymoney

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assessment the Rivers Agency has made of the works carried out as a result of the topographical survey on the flood bank adjacent to the Meadows in Ballymoney.

(AQW 1896/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The topographical survey conducted by my Rivers Agency, following the exceptional flooding during August 2008, identified the level of protection afforded by the floodbank adjacent to the Meadows could be improved by the removal of lowspots. When this work was being undertaken the opportunity was also taken to provide additional freeboard, which provides some increased protection to the properties as clay bank structures are prone to localised settlement and displacement. Rivers Agency is content that no further works are required and, as part of the routine programme of inspection on all designated flood defence structures, will inspect the floodbank adjacent to the Meadows every 3 years.

Flood Bank: The Meadows, Ballymoney

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether minor works to landscape the floodbank adjacent to the Meadows in Ballymoney have been completed.

(AQW 1897/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Minor landscaping works to the floodbank adjacent to the Meadows in Ballymoney have commenced and I am informed will be completed by 23 September 2011.

Glenaan River

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what flood alleviation works have been carried out by the Rivers Agency as a result of the feasibility study carried out on the Glenaan River. (AQW 1898/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Glenaan River from upstream of the Primary School to the upper limit of the Dall River has been designated within the terms of the Drainage (NI) Order 1973. Regular maintenance will be performed by Rivers Agency as deemed necessary. Bank stabilisation works were completed in 2010 and flow through the road bridge has improved as a result.

Kellswater (Kildrum/Woodgreen) Study

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what works were identified to be carried out as a result of the Kellswater (Kildrum/Woodgreen) study; and which of these works have been completed.

(AQW 1899/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: A study to examine options to reduce the risk of flooding has not identified any works where the benefits exceed the cost, due to the high level of protection that properties already have. In these circumstances my Department does not propose to undertake further work beyond regular maintenance of the watercourse and providing assistance during flood events.

Information is also available through NI Direct for property owners to help them take action to manage the risk of flooding.

Ahoghill Village Stream

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the study on the Ahoghill Village Stream, including what works have been identified and completed.

(AQW 1900/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: A study to examine options to reduce the risk of flooding has identified a viable scheme costing of the order of £2.6m. Details of this study can be found on the Rivers section within my Department's web site.

Given my Department's existing programme of capital works and the available capital allocation it is unlikely that these works will be undertaken within the current 4 year funding period. My Department will continue to bid for additional funding as opportunities arise, however, the current economic situation means that we must prioritise what funds are available.

Slurry Spreading

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what restrictions are in place on the spreading of slurry.

(AQW 1926/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Nitrates Action Programme (NI) Regulations 2010 place restrictions on the spreading of slurry and other organic manures. The Regulations are joint legislation between my Department and the Department of Environment.

The Regulations prohibit the spreading of slurry between 15 October and 31 January. This is referred to as the 'closed period'.

The Regulations also place restrictions on how much, when and how slurry can be spread outside the closed period. These include the following:

slurry must not be spread when the soil is waterlogged, flooded (or likely to flood), frozen, snow covered, if heavy rain is forecast within 48 hours, or where land is steeply sloping with a significant risk of water pollution occurring.

- slurry must not be spread within 10m of a watercourse, 20m of a lake or 50m of a borehole, spring or well.
- slurry must be spread using inverted splash plate, trailing shoe, trailing hose, soil injection, band spreading or soil incorporation methods.
- single applications of slurry are limited to 50 cubic metres per hectare with a minimum of three weeks between applications.

These measures promote efficient and sustainable use of the nutrients in slurry for crop fertilisation and protect water quality.

A Guidance Booklet for farmers on the Nitrates Action Programme explains the measures in more detail. In addition, my Department's Code of Good Agricultural Practice contains advice on best practice for the management of slurry including minimising odour. Both the Guidance Booklet and the Code are available from the DARD website at www.dardni.gov.uk/environment/countrysidemanagement.

Inspection and enforcement of the Regulations is carried out by the NI Environment Agency, an agency of the Department of Environment.

Slurry Spreading

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she has any plans to alter the regulations which place restrictions on the spreading of slurry.

(AQW 1928/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Nitrates Action Programme Regulations (NI) 2010 place restrictions on the spreading of slurry and are joint legislation between my Department and the Department of Environment (DOE).

The Regulations prohibit the spreading of slurry and other organic manures between 15 October and 31 January. This is referred to as the 'closed period'. There are also restrictions on how, when and how much slurry can be spread outside the closed period.

The purpose of these measures is to promote efficient and sustainable use of the nutrients in slurry for crop fertilisation and protect water quality.

At present, the Departments do not intend to alter the current restrictions on the spreading of slurry. However, the European Commission has expressed the view that the closed period for slurry spreading in the north may need to be extended to more effectively reduce the risk of water pollution.

Therefore, my Department has commissioned the Agri-Food & Biosciences Institute to conduct local research on the impact of slurry spreading and a survey of slurry spreading practices.

When the research is completed, my Department and DOE will review the restrictions on slurry spreading in light of the findings of the research. Any future changes to the Nitrates Action Programme Regulations would be the subject of public consultation.

Veterinary Students

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the increase in student fees in Great Britain, whether her Department has any plans to assist veterinary students who travel there to study.

(AQW 1937/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department and the agri-food sector depend on the availability of veterinary advice, but I have reviewed the position and, based on the latest evidence, am satisfied there is no current or emerging risk to the supply of veterinary professionals locally. I met recently with representatives

of the North of Ireland Veterinary Association and the British Veterinary Association and listened to their concerns about the consequences of high tuition fees for students wishing to study veterinary medicine. This is an issue that, of course, affects more than veterinary students and I have considerable personal sympathy with the challenges that future students will face.

As you will be aware, there are no veterinary medicine courses available locally, but they are available in Dublin and at seven universities in Britain. Institutions in Britain charging higher fees will be offering bursaries to students from low income backgrounds as part of their access arrangements. Students from the north will also be able to avail of the means tested support arrangements offered by DEL if they are from lower income households. In the case of those wishing to study in Dublin, I understand that no tuition fees are chargeable, though there is a registration fee which is currently reimbursed by DEL.

I have already relayed the concerns expressed to me by the professional veterinary bodies to the Minister for Employment and Learning and intend meeting with him to seek an assurance that he will keep this issue under review.

Rural Development Programme

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how the Rural Development Programme database helps her Department and the associated organisations in the effective and efficient delivery of the Programme.

(AQW 1961/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Rural Development Programme database, known as System 2007, facilitates the effective and efficient delivery of the programme and does this through:

- I.T. provision which meets all relevant EU regulations pertaining to the operation of the NIRDP 2007-2013;
- the efficient and continuous provision of a modern, centralised, twenty-four hours online website and database system which accommodates the submission and processing of online applications for funding under the Programme's various Axes and associated measures;
- the provision of a secure IT system only accessible to relevant Departmental staff and approved Delivery Agent staff;
- the inclusion of a documented and validated audit trail for all financial transactions;
- the provision of a platform for the delivery of online services to farmers and other programme beneficiaries;
- the provision of an extensive ad-hoc reporting system which can be tailored to meet specific reporting requirements.
- a flexible IT system which can be adapted, if required, to meet changing requirements of users during the course of the programme.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how her Department is tackling Bovine Tuberculosis.

(AQW 1974/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: There has been considerable progress made in reducing TB incidence in cattle in the north of Ireland. The herd incidence has almost halved from nearly 10% in 2002 to 5.03% at 31 July 2011. The number of TB reactor cattle in 2010 at 6,400 was 22% lower than in 2009 and the lowest since 1998. Also, the number of herd breakdowns in 2010 at 1,150 was the lowest since 1996 when TB levels were on a rising trend.

While these figures are encouraging, there is clearly more work to be done. TB is a very complex and challenging disease that is difficult to eradicate and it has an adverse impact on those farm

businesses affected. My aim is ultimately to eradicate TB in cattle here, but there is no simple solution or 'quick-fix'.

We have a rigorous EU Commission approved TB eradication programme in place that includes a strand to address the wildlife factor. This eradication programme is vital in safeguarding our annual £1,000 million plus export-dependent livestock and livestock products industry. Our programme is focused on the detection of diseased or high risk animals; the compulsory removal of those animals from their herd of origin to slaughter; and the restriction of movements of cattle from infected herds until they are tested clear.

My Department continues to enhance its TB eradication programme. We now remove as reactors those animals that give an inconclusive result to a second consecutive TB test rather than after a third test as before. We also use DNA identity tags on reactors to help reduce the potential for animal substitution post valuation, which should help to reduce any risk of fraud and further disease spread.

We have improved the rigour of the TB testing process through regular communications with Private Veterinary Practitioners (PVPs) and improvements in the PVP supervision system; as well as improving DARD's own delivery of TB testing through monitoring Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

We are presently reviewing the use of the gamma interferon blood test in the TB programme to ensure we are making best use of the test. We recently completed the fieldwork for a TB Biosecurity Study to assess what critical differences there are between TB breakdown and clear herds in a TB high incidence area in County Down. The results from that Study should add to our knowledge of TB risks and help inform new biosecurity advice for farmers here.

Funding has been reserved in the DARD budget to commission further TB and wildlife research and studies to provide a robust evidence base to guide the TB eradication strategy. It is important that we do not duplicate the expensive research work that is ongoing in other areas, but that we draw down the lessons from that work and collaborate where appropriate.

Interventions to address the wildlife factor may include improving biosecurity, as well as more direct intervention such as the vaccination of badgers, which may be the most feasible solution in the long-term. My officials are closely tracking the studies being conducted in the south of Ireland and in England to develop a viable oral badger vaccine and cost-effective means of vaccine deployment, and also the developments to produce a viable cattle vaccine.

Direct interventions in wildlife will incur substantial cost and must be fully justified in cost-benefit terms. We need to be certain that the benefit would justify the considerable costs.

Action to deal with cattle to cattle transmission of TB will continue to be an important element of the TB strategy as we move forward

DARD: Special Adviser

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether her Special Adviser is paid within Band A or Band B of the Department of Finance and Personnel's salary scale; and, if it is within Band B whether, in light of the DFP decision to increase the upper limit of the Band B scale to £90,000, there has been an increase in salary or an increase is planned.

(AQW 1975/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Special Adviser in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is paid within Band B of the Department of Finance and Personnel's salary scale. There has been no increase and are no plans to increase the Special Adviser's salary following DFP's decision to raise the upper limit of Band B to £90,000.

DARD: Arm's-length Bodies

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the cost to her Department of its arm's-length bodies in each of the last two years.

(AQW 1991/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The cost to my Department of its arms-length bodies in each of the last two years is detailed below. This includes the cost of Sponsor Branches.

	2009/10	2010/11
Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute	£41,637,625	£41,905,746
Agricultural Wages Board	£24,560	£22,912
Livestock and Meat Commission for NI	£237,593	£181,085
NI Fishery Harbour Authority	£24,249	£37,999
Loughs Agency of the Foyle and Carlingford Irish Lights Commission	£2,661,000	£2,009,500
Drainage Council for NI	£2,284	£1,895

Public Sector Estate: Woodland Cover

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) what steps are currently being taken to extend woodland cover on the public sector estate, particularly on land which is currently unused but still needs to be maintained; (ii) what plans are in place to encourage Departments and local Councils to use their land for tree planting schemes in future; and (iii) for an estimate of the potential savings on maintenance per hectare over a ten year period.

(AQW 2018/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department's Forest Service offer advice and grant assistance to create new woodland under the Woodland Grant Scheme and these grants are available to public bodies such as Councils, as well as private landowners.

My Department also manages a significant land area, much of which is already managed for forestry purposes by Forest Service. The Forest estate includes some areas of land which are retained unplanted due to their unsuitability to support tree growth for biodiversity landscaping and public access purposes.

Forest Service has written to all Councils, providing information on woodland creation and describing how Councils can consider new woodland areas to deliver their commitments on public access, biodiversity and wood production. Forest Service has had follow up meetings with those Councils which expressed an interest and to date has approved a planting application from one Council and is currently processing another. Forest Service has also met with the Housing Executive on the subject of new woodland creation and has subsequently approved a planting application.

Although Government departments are not eligible for planting grant assistance, Forest Service has met both the Department of Regional Development's Road Service and the Ministry of Defence to encourage them to consider, where appropriate, the creation of new woodland on land they manage.

The savings in maintenance costs of land as a result of woodland creation vary considerably on a site by site basis, depending on the previous land use and requirements for maintenance. Creating new woodland, is widely acknowledged to be an inexpensive way of restoring or maintaining the environment whilst contributing to wider goals of community and economic regeneration where woodland is an appropriate land use.

Woodland Inventory

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why the comprehensive woodland inventory that has been produced by Forest Service will not be signed-off until March 2012.

(AQW 2019/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Forest Service is working to develop a woodland inventory, using Geographic Information System (GIS) technology, from existing data sources.

Work to generate combined woodland data commenced in the 2010/11 business year. Further analysis is being carried out this year, taking account of new data, to validate the combined woodland data. This will result in a further refinement of the woodland data and at the end of this business year, Forest Service will publish improved baseline information of woodland area in the north of Ireland.

Fracking

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the practice of fracking and its effects on the agriculture industry.

(AQW 2178/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: To date my Department has made no assessment of the effects of the practice of fracking on the agriculture industry.

DARD: Capital Projects

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what capital projects her Department has planned for the East Londonderry constituency in each of the next three years.

(AQW 2279/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Department will carry out a number of capital investment projects within this constituency over the next three years. The current position in respect of planned capital projects is shown on Table 1, below.

Additional capital investments may be funded over the budget period; however, at this stage, commitments have not yet been confirmed.

TABLE 1

The Capital investment projects planned for the East Derry constituency.	
Project	Description
Capital: Rivers Agency	1 project at Coleraine, Lodge Burn under Flood Alleviation and Drainage Infrastructure in the 2011/12 financial year. Refurbishment of the Portna Sluice Gate on the Lower Bann at Kilrea in the 2011/12 financial year. 2 projects to refurbish Lyttlesdale Drain Grille at Garvagh in the 2011-12 financial year.
Capital Grants, Axis 1: Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme (NIRDP)	Farm Modernisation Programme tranche 2: investment in new plant and machinery – 172 projects in the 2011/12 financial year. Manure Technology Efficiency Scheme tranche 2: 7 projects in the 2011/12 financial year.

The Capital investment projects planned for the East Derry constituency.	
Project	Description
Capital Grants, Axis 3: NIRDP	Diversification of Farm Businesses: 12 projects in the 2011/12 and 2012/13 financial years. Business Creation and Development: 16 projects in the 2011/12 and 2012/13 financial years. Tourism Activities: 7 projects in the 2011/12 and 2012/13 financial years. Improving Basic Services in Rural Areas: 3 projects in the 2011/12 and 2012/13 financial years. Village Renewal: 1 project in the 2011/12 financial year.

Project	Description
Capital Grants, Interreg IV	Environmental Improvements: 1 project at Kilrea in the 2011/12, 2012/13 and 2013/14 financial years.
Capital Grants, Biomass Processing Challenge Fund	Anaerobic Digester: 1 project in the 2011/12 financial year.
Capital Grants, Fisheries Division	European Fisheries Fund: Lobster V notching programme will fund projects in the 2011/12 and 2012/13 financial years. Vessel Modernisation will fund 2 projects in the 2011/12 and 2012/13 financial years.

Countryside Management Scheme

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on payments under the latest Countryside Management Scheme.

(AQO 402/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I can confirm that in 2010, my Department received 913 claims to the new Countryside Management Scheme (the CMS) on the Single Application Form. At 1 September 2011, 455 of these claims had been paid.

I anticipate that all outstanding payments will be made before 31 December 2011 providing that there are no claim validations which need further investigation. The reason that the remaining inspections are progressing more slowly compared with the 2009 claim year is because DARD must inspect an additional 400 claims. The number of claim inspections has been increased in line with EU Regulations, because when initial inspections were carried out earlier this year, a high level of non-compliance and over-declaration was detected. This additional work has placed pressure on resources in my Department, however we are progressing claims as quickly as possible.

Anaerobic Digestion Plants

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) on how many occasions in each of the last two years her Department has been consulted by Planning Service on applications for

Anaerobic Digestion Plants; (ii) to how many requests the Department has responded; (iii) how many responses are currently being processed; and (iv) what is the average time taken to issue a response. (AQW 2284/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department's records regarding Planning Service Applications for Anaerobic Digestion Plants indicate

- (i) that the number of occasions in each of the last two years on which DARD has been consulted is as shown in Table 1:

TABLE 1

Year	1 September 2009 to 31 August 2010	1 September 2010 to 23 September 2011
Number of occasions	4	1

- (ii) Responses have been completed for four of these; (iii) one response is in the process of consultation; (iv) the average time taken to respond to the completed requests was 22 working days.

Irish Ploughing Championships

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) whether she attended the Irish Ploughing Championships on 20 September 2011 in her official capacity; (ii) whether her Department will pay the expenses of the visit; and (iii) to detail the cost of the visit.

(AQW 2391/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill:

- (i) I attended the National Ploughing Championships on 20 and 21 September 2011 in my official capacity as Minister for Agriculture & Rural Development. This event provided me with a valuable opportunity to meet and network with counterparts and industry representatives from across the island and show my support for exhibitors and ploughing competitors from the north.
- (ii) This visit was official business, and the costs will be covered by the Department.
- (iii) The cost of the visit for the ministerial party has not been finalised but should be approximately £1,700 for accommodation and meals.

Groceries Code Adjudicator

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the introduction of a Groceries Code Adjudicator.

(AQO 397/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As the regulation of issues affecting competition is a reserved matter you will understand that the introduction of a Groceries Code Adjudicator is not within my remit. However, I support fully the concept of fair pricing and welcome the decision by the British Government in August 2010 to proceed to establish a Grocery Code Adjudicator.

On 24 May 2011 the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) published a draft Groceries Code Adjudicator Bill and invited Parliament to undertake pre-legislative scrutiny. Scrutiny of the Bill was undertaken by the BIS Committee which held four evidence sessions with a cross-section of stakeholders, including large retailers and suppliers' organisations. BIS also received a written contribution from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Committee. BIS are now considering these and other comments received and will provide a Government response in due course.

I also want to place on record that I hope that the British Government will introduce an adjudicator with real power at an early date. I believe that all links in the food chain are dependent on each other; that

farmers and food processors should be treated fairly and have confidence that the new Adjudicator will deal effectively with local complaints. In my view this is relevant, as there are some supermarkets here that operate on an all island basis.

Single Farm Payments

Mr Girvan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on Single Farm Payment applications, including the percentage of applications that have been selected for further investigation.

(AQO 400/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Although the member's question refers to the Single Farm Payment scheme, I understand that further clarification has determined that the question refers to inspections regarding the new NI Countryside Management Scheme. I can confirm that in 2010, my Department received 913 claims to the new Countryside Management Scheme (the CMS) on the Single Application Form. At 1 September 2011, 455 of these claims had been paid. In line with EU Regulations, a minimum of 5% of claims must be inspected and earlier this year 66 inspections were carried out, which is equivalent to 7% of scheme claims. These inspections detected a high level of non-compliance and over-declaration and as a result an additional 400 claims must be inspected. This means that almost 44% of claims have been selected for further inspection. These inspections are on-going.

The need for additional inspections has placed pressure on resources in my Department. This means that the remaining payments for the 2010 NICMS claims will progress more slowly compared with the 2009 claim year.

I anticipate that all outstanding payments will be made before 31 December 2011 providing that the additional inspections do not indicate that there are claim validations which may need further investigation.

Flooding: East Belfast

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the East Belfast flood alleviation plan.

(AQO 406/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am aware of recent media interest and can confirm that the integrated contract for the Greenway environmental scheme and flood alleviation works is continuing. While I am disappointed at the rate of progress I can advise that one major culvert on the Loop River is substantially complete. I remain committed to providing flood alleviation for the people of East Belfast.

Agrifood

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her plans for developing growth within the agri-food sector.

(AQO 407/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am grateful for this opportunity to outline my plans for developing growth within the agri-food sector. Since taking up office, I have consistently stated my belief that the focus for the wider economy moving forward must be to ensure sustainable growth that can create jobs. The key to this is through the type of export-led growth demonstrated by the agri-food sector, whose external sales have increased in value by 66% over the past 10 years.

Further growth within this sector has to be a team effort, with DARD, DETI/InvestNI and DEL who each have a remit within the agri-food sector. There are also arrangements in place for close working with industry representatives and it is through this collaborative approach that a strategy for the sector was produced last year. Undoubtedly this provides good foundations and we now need to build on this to develop a longer-term strategic vision for the sector, focussing on export-led growth targets.

My plans for doing this involve working closely with DETI and InvestNI to establish a Food Strategy Board, made up of industry representatives, with an independent Chair. The key role of this Board, working alongside Government, will be to take the existing strategy to the next level, developing challenging targets for growth and development in the longer term.

Of course, in addition to this, my Department continues to provide a wide range of service to the industry through knowledge transfer and education services at CAFRE, research and innovation support through AFBI, as well as financial support through the Rural Development Programme.

I am committed that my Department will continue to support the sector in its efforts to grow further and that we will continue to work alongside other Executive Departments and industry to maximise the potential of this crucial part of our economy.

Agriculture Wages Board

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why she will not abolish the Agricultural Wages Board.

(AQO 409/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My view is that the Agriculture Wages Board is a valuable forum for wage negotiations and importantly is used as a benchmark for the wider Agri-food industry and other rural occupations.

It ensures that agricultural workers have at least a minimum basic wage and reasonable minimum terms and conditions of employment; provides a statutory level of protection for agricultural workers, which goes beyond that provided by general employment law; and provides a pay-bargaining structure for employers and workers.

Although it is no longer necessary to carry out quinquennial reviews of Non-Departmental Public Bodies, the Agricultural Wages Board's (AWB's) management statement requires regular reviews and in line with good practice, I intend to complete a review of the Agricultural Wages Board in the coming months.

Following the review I will consider the views expressed and options available and make a decision on the way forward.

Marine Bill

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she is liaising with the Minister of the Environment on the content of the Marine Bill.

(AQO 410/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am liaising with the Minister of the Environment on the Marine Bill and we had a useful meeting on 21 July at which the Bill was discussed. In fact we are meeting again later to-day and again the Bill will be on the agenda. The main issues we are focusing on are management of marine environment and establishment of marine conservation zones.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Libraries NI

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for further details of Libraries NI store losses which included £98,988 of stock-taking discrepancies as highlighted in its accounts for the 2009/10 financial year; and what procedures have been put in place to prevent a recurrence.

(AQW 1790/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): The total amount of stores losses for 2009/10 was approximately £287,000, made up as follows:

- £160,000 non-returned stock items
- £99,000 stock taking discrepancies
- £26,000 vandalism
- £2,000 vehicle accidents

1 Non return of Items of Stock

55,459 items of stock items (books, DVD's etc) were borrowed by library members and not returned. These were valued at £159,797.

In order to reduce the non-return of stock items fines are imposed on members holding overdue books. Three reminders are issued to members seeking the return of overdue books. Once overdue fines amount to £10, adult members are banned from further borrowing for a period of 2 years.

2 Stock Taking discrepancy

40,700 items of library stock (valued at £98,988) were identified as missing while carrying out physical stock counts in a number of libraries.

The Education and Library Boards had not carried out these physical counts for several years and therefore these discrepancies will have arisen over this period of time, although they were all accounted for in the 2009-10 Report and Accounts.

Libraries NI is implementing a rolling programme of annual physical stock counts to ensure a more prompt identification of discrepancies. In addition Libraries NI is investing in security gates in a number of libraries and security tagging a proportion of stock to act as a deterrent to the theft of stock.

The remaining store losses of £28,000 consist of vandalism costs of approximately £26,000 and vehicle accidents of approximately £2,000.

Libraries NI

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the reasons for the £3000 in compensation paid out by Libraries NI in the 2009/10 financial year.

(AQW 1791/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Libraries NI have informed me that in 2009/10 financial year four Industrial Tribunal cases were settled following conciliation.

Three cases were internal grievances relating to terms and conditions of employment.

One case was in relation to a procedural error in a recruitment exercise conducted by a transferor organisation. In line with transfer provisions under TUPE, liability for the case transferred to Libraries NI on 1 April 2009.

Libraries NI

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure why Libraries NI cannot identify the VAT debtor for its 2008 and 2009 balances which are currently valued at £650,000; and what action is being taken to recover this money.

(AQW 1794/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Libraries NI was established on 1 April 2009 and this issue relates to expenditure on library services by the Education and Library Boards before that date.

Libraries NI inform me that they have been unable to obtain from the Education and Library Boards the analysis of their VAT debtor relating to public libraries for 1 April 2008 and 31 March 2009. Therefore

Libraries NI are unable to show the comparative figures for the 2 years before it began operations in their 2009/10 Report and Accounts.

The Education and Library Boards advised that it was not possible to identify this figure without incurring significant costs. The Education and Library Boards have recovered the total amounts owing to them as at 1 April 2008 and 31 March 2009.

Libraries NI assure me that they have recovered their VAT debtor of £655,000 as at 31 March 2010.

Football Clubs

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assistance her Department provides for football clubs such as Glebe Rangers who play in the IFA Championship.

(AQW 1797/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sport NI is the lead development agency for sport in the north of Ireland with responsibility for the distribution of funding. In the last three financial years, Sport NI has provided £2,487,971 of exchequer funding to association football clubs who play in the IFA Championship. A breakdown of this funding is set out in the table below. Furthermore, a number of Championship clubs have applied for assistance under Sport NI's Sport Matters Community Capital Programme. These applications have been assessed and are presently on a waiting list for awards subject to available funding and meeting project management requirements. Sport NI is also currently operating a revenue based, small grants programme, Awards for Sport, to which Championship clubs, such as Glebe Rangers, may be eligible to apply. This programme is due to close for applications on 26 September 2011. In the future, there will be potential for Championship clubs to benefit from sub-regional development funding. This funding has been endorsed by the Executive as a priority area of spend in the next CSR period (2015) and a Strategic Outline Case is currently being developed having regard to strategic needs.

SPORT NI FUNDING TO CHAMPIONSHIP CLUBS

Year	Club	Project	Award
2009/10	Institute FC	Stadia Safety Programme	£727,200
2009/10	Knockbreda FC	Soccer Strategy Facilities	£87,100
2009/10	Newry City FC	Soccer Strategy Facilities	£231,500
2009/10	Sport & Leisure FC	Soccer Strategy Facilities	£87,050
2009/10	Armagh City FC	Soccer Strategy Facilities	£84,080
2009/10	Ballyclare Comrades FC	Soccer Strategy Facilities	£232,000
2009/10	Ballinamallard United FC	Soccer Strategy Facilities	£87,050
2009/10	Portstewart FC	Soccer Strategy Facilities	£79,713
2009/10	Moyola Park AFC	Soccer Strategy Facilities	£83,079
2009/10	H&W Welders FC	Soccer Strategy Facilities	£75,488
2009/10	Annagh United FC	Soccer Strategy Facilities	£84,872
2009/10	Lurgan Celtic FC	Soccer Strategy Facilities	£77,905
2009/10	Dergview FC	Floodlighting	£152,084
2009/10	Ballinamallard United FC	Floodlighting	£132,978
2009/10	Newry City FC	Purchase of equipment	£8,500
2009/10	Ballymoney United FC	Awards for Sport	£5,033

Year	Club	Project	Award
2010/11	Newry City FC	Stadia Safety Urgent Works	£58,687
2010/11	Ballyclare Comrades FC	Stadia Safety Urgent Works	£59,652
2010/11	Larne FC	Stadia Safety Urgent Works	£53,200
2010/11	Institute FC	Stadia Safety Programme	£80,800
Totals			£2,487,971

Irish League Football

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding her Department has given to Irish League football in each of the last three years.

(AQW 1798/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sport NI is the lead development agency for sport in the north of Ireland with responsibility for the distribution of funding. In the last three financial years Sport NI has provided £7,038,307 of exchequer funding to Irish League clubs in the IFA Premiership and Championship 1 and 2 leagues. A breakdown of this funding is set out below.

IFA PREMIERSHIP

Year	Club	Amount
2008/09	Cliftonville FC	£300,000
2008/09	Donegal Celtic FC	£824,133
2009/10	Ballymena United FC	£1,025,035
2009/10	Crusaders FC	£448,706
2009/10	Dungannon Swifts FC	£232,000
2009/10	Glenavon FC	£347,000
2009/10	Portadown FC	£314,495
2010/11	Carrick Rangers FC	£52,760
2010/11	Coleraine FC	£67,067
2010/11	Crusaders FC	£704,070
2010/11	Donegal Celtic FC	£48,954
2010/11	Glenavon FC	£24,404
2010/11	Glentoran FC	£59,350
2010/11	Linfield FC	£53,582
2010/11	Portadown FC	£48,780
Total		£4,550,336

IFA CHAMPIONSHIP 1

Year	Club	Amount
2008/09	Dergview FC	£152,084

Year	Club	Amount
2009/10	Ballinamallard United FC	£220,028
2009/10	H&W Welders FC	£75,488
2009/10	Newry City FC	£240,000
2010/11	Institute FC	£808,000
2010/11	Larne FC	£53,200
2010/11	Newry City FC	£58,687
Total		£1,607,487

IFA CHAMPIONSHIP 2

Year	Club	Amount
2009/10	Annagh United FC	£84,872
2009/10	Ballyclare Comrades FC	£232,000
2009/10	Ballymoney United FC	£5,033
2009/10	Knockbreda FC	£87,100
2009/10	Lurgan Celtic FC	£77,905
2009/10	Moyola Park AFC	£83,079
2009/10	Portstewart FC	£79,7132
2009/10	Sport & Leisure FC	£87,050
2010/11	Armagh City FC	£84,080
2010/11	Ballyclare Comrades FC	£59,652
Total		£880,484

Ballymoney Library

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the reasons for the proposed reduction in the opening hours of Ballymoney Library.

(AQW 1830/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I recognise that both my Department and sponsored bodies have already had to take very difficult decisions in planning to live within reduced budget allocations over the next four years.

In managing these new pressures, the Department will work closely with sponsored bodies to minimise impacts on front line services and protect priority areas.

Libraries NI have commenced a review of Library opening hours, including those in Ballymoney Library, which will allow Libraries NI to achieve the savings required to live within their budget allocations over the next four years

I would emphasise that nothing has been finalised by the Libraries NI Board at this stage. I understand that a consultation has commenced and that will include a conversation with each community about when they would like to see their library opened. I would encourage people to take part in the consultation.

Decisions will not be made until all the information from the consultation has been collated and presented to the Board of Libraries NI. The Board of Libraries NI contains councillors from the DUP, the SDLP, my own party and the UUP.

Ballymoney Library

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps she has taken to safeguard the long-term future of Ballymoney Library.

(AQW 1831/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I recognise that both my Department and its sponsored bodies have already had to take very difficult decisions in planning to live within reduced budget allocations over the next four years.

In managing these new pressures, the Department will work closely with its sponsored bodies to minimise impacts on front line services and protect priority areas.

In the light of the budget settlement and the level of savings that are required the Board of Libraries NI determined, reluctantly, that it was preferable to reduce opening hours across the entire library network rather than close a substantial number of libraries. Libraries NI informed me that they took this approach to protect the network of sustainable libraries over the longer term.

The operation and viability of specific libraries is a matter for the Board of Libraries NI.

Decisions will not be made until all the information from the consultation has been collated and presented to the Board of Libraries NI. The Board of Libraries NI contains councillors from the DUP, the SDLP, my own party and the UUP.

Ballymoney Library

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what weight she will attach to the responses to the public consultation on the proposed reduction in the opening hours of Ballymoney Library.

(AQW 1832/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Board of Libraries NI has commenced a review of Library opening hours, including those in Ballymoney Library.

I would emphasise that nothing has been finalised by the Libraries NI Board at this stage. I understand that a consultation has commenced and that will include a conversation with each community about when they would like to see their library opened. I would encourage people to take part in the consultation.

Consideration of the responses made to the public consultation is a matter for the Board of Libraries NI.

Decisions will not be made until all the information from the consultation has been collated and presented to the Board of Libraries NI. The Board of Libraries NI contains councillors from the DUP, the SDLP, my own party and the UUP.

Ballymoney Library

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what equality proofing has been carried out in relation to the proposed reduction in the opening hours of Ballymoney Library.

(AQW 1833/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I recognise that both the Department and its sponsored bodies will to take very difficult decisions while planning to live within reduced budget allocations over the next four years.

In order to deliver some of these savings Libraries NI have commenced a review of Library opening hours, including the opening hours of Ballymoney Library. I would emphasise that nothing has been finalised by the Libraries NI Board at this stage. I understand that a consultation has commenced and

that will include a conversation with each community about when they would like to see their library opened. I would encourage people to take part in the consultation.

The operation of specific libraries is a matter for the Board of Libraries NI.

A draft Equality Impact Assessment and a draft Rural Impact Assessment have been published as part of the consultation process. The documents are available on the Libraries NI website and consultees are invited to comment on these documents as well as through questionnaires. Contact is being made with groups representative of the Section 75 categories and of rural interests.

Rivers: Conservation Limits

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the conservation limits for each index river.

(AQW 1838/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The table below contains details of Conservation Limits for each index river within the DCAL jurisdiction. The Department does not retain details of the individual river Conservation Limits in the Loughs Agency area (Foyle & Carlingford).

River	Region	CL ova deposition range (000's ova)
Bush	Northern	2310
Glendun	Northern	361-540
Shimna	South east	209-314
Main	Lough Neagh	2184-3265
Blackwater	Lough Neagh	1725-2578
Garvary	South West	84-125

Library Opening Hours and Provision

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the rationale for the proposal to reduce library opening hours and provision.

(AQW 1839/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In the light of the budget settlement and the level of savings that are required the Board of Libraries NI determined, reluctantly, that it was preferable to reduce opening hours rather than close a substantial number of libraries. The Libraries NI Board felt that this approach would protect the network of sustainable libraries into the future and could be reversed if additional funding becomes available.

I would emphasise that nothing has been finalised by the Libraries NI Board at this stage. I understand that a consultation has commenced and that will include a conversation with each community about when they would like to see their library opened. I would encourage people to take part in the consultation.

Decisions will not be made until all the information from the consultation has been collated and presented to the Board of Libraries NI. The Board of Libraries NI contains councillors from the DUP, the SDLP, my own party and the UUP.

I recognise that both the Department and its sponsored bodies have already had to take very difficult decisions in planning to live within reduced budget allocations over the next four years.

In managing these new pressures, the Department will work closely with its sponsored bodies to minimise impacts on front line services and protect priority areas.

Odyssey Trust Company Limited

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the governance accountability arrangements for the Odyssey Trust Company Limited; and to explain (i) how and by whom directors are appointed; (ii) whether public procurement rules apply and for her assessment of whether they are satisfactorily applied; and (iii) what control mechanisms exist within her Department. (AQW 1858/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Odyssey Trust Company (OTC) Limited is a charity and an independent company limited by guarantee.

OTC's obligations to DCAL and DCAL's corresponding rights are contractual and governed by the 1998 Funding Agreement.

- (i) Appointments of Directors are the responsibility of the OTC. Directors are appointed by the OTC Trustees. DCAL plays no part in the recruitment, selection or appointment of directors.
- (ii) The OTC is a private company with charitable status, and therefore is not bound by public procurement rules.
- (iii) Control mechanisms are as set out in the 1998 funding agreement.

Odyssey Trust Company Limited

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, given its charitable status and reliance on public money, for her assessment of the detail contained in the annual accounts published by the Odyssey Trust Company Limited; and to detail how (i) establishment costs of £3m per annum; and (ii) miscellaneous or sundry expenses of £100,000 per month arise. (AQW 1859/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Odyssey Trust Company (OTC) Limited is a charity and an independent company limited by guarantee. The OTC therefore publishes annual accounts in line with company law and under charities regulations. These accounts are independently audited and available from company registry.

OTC has no ongoing reliance on public money other than the money for the provision of the science centre, W5 Ltd.

As with any other charitable organisation, those responsible for OTC are duty bound to ensure that they operate efficiently and effectively within the framework of its Memorandum and Articles, and in full accordance with relevant legislation and regulations.

Odyssey Trust Company Limited

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, given its charitable status and reliance on public money, for her assessment of the fact that the Odyssey Trust Company Limited holds around £40m in the bank; and to detail any charitable causes that have been supported by the Trust over the last five years. (AQW 1860/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Odyssey Trust Company (OTC) Limited is a charity and an independent company limited by guarantee.

The OTC has no ongoing reliance on public money other than the money for the provision of the science centre, W5 Ltd.

The Department understands that balances held by the OTC are for the furtherance of the Trust's charitable obligations, and include money held for advanced tickets sales, other creditors and in relation to a Capital Leasing Scheme.

OTC exercises its charitable objectives through the provision of the science centre.

Community Festival Funding in 2012

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline her Department's plans for Community Festival Funding in 2012.

(AQW 1865/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The budget for the Community Festivals Fund (CFF) has been £450k per annum and Councils are required to provide match-funding. The Department is in the process of undertaking an evaluation of the operation of the CFF and, whilst the findings from this will inform the future delivery of the Fund, it is expected that the funding in 2012 will again be £450k. Figures for 2012 are indicative only as there may be further annual budget exercises and you will also be aware existing pressures around student fees.

Licensed Fishing Engines

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of licensed fishing engines that are operating within her Department's jurisdiction; and how long they have been in operation.

(AQW 1902/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL is empowered to licence fishing engines within its jurisdiction by the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966 and the current licensing system was introduced in 1967. The Lough's Agency is responsible for the licensing of fishing engines in the Foyle and Carlingford areas.

A "fishing engine" as defined in the Act, is a net, instrument or device whatsoever capable of being used for taking or killing fish and as such a fishing rod used by a recreational angler is classed as a fishing engine.

Fishing rod licences are issued annually and the table below outlines the various types of licences available and the numbers issued in 2010.

Type of licence	No. sold
Game Season	8143
Foyle Endorsement	638
Coarse Season	2603
Disabled Licence Game	1795
Disabled Licence Coarse	132
Game Senior Citizens	4489
Game Juvenile	2261
Game 14 Day	54
Game 3 Day	685
Coarse Senior Citizens	237
Coarse Juvenile	525
Coarse 14 Day	67
Coarse 3 Day	347
Joint Coarse 14 Day	996
Joint Coarse 3 Day	1015

Type of licence	No. sold
Joint Game 14 Day	334
Joint Game 3 Day	2172

The table below outlines the various types of commercial licences available and the numbers issued in 2010.

	No. sold
Eels	
Eel Weirs	3
Eel Draft Nets (Lough Neagh)	37
Eel Long Line (Lough Neagh)	79
Eel Long Line (Lough Neagh)	2
Eel Long Line (Lough Erne)	1
Eel Long Line (Lough Erne)	-
Eel Fyke Nets	71
Freshwater other than eels	
Lough Neagh Draft Nets	16
Lough Neagh Trout Nets	114
Trammel Nets Coarse	491
Bait Nets	45
Salmon fishing (Sea & Tideways)	
Bag Nets	2
Fixed Tidal Draft Nets	-
Drift Nets	2
Draft Nets	2

Licensed Fishing Engines

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many fish have been harvested from each of her Department's licensed coastal fishing engines in each year since 2005.

(AQW 1903/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Below are details of how many fish have been harvested from each of the Department's licensed coastal fishing engines since 2005

COMMERCIAL SALMON CATCH RETURNS

Net name	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
North Coast	1068	673	680	427	482	437
North Coast	24	32	176	nil	64	26

Net name	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Ballyteerim	1167 (10)	891 (3)	881	740 (1)	420	636 (36)
Torr Head	871	788	888 (4)	748 (28)	550 (7)	783
South Eastern coast	24	35	22	20	21	23
South Eastern coast	nil	nil	nil	nil	nil	nil
Carrick-a-rede	nil	nil	nil	nil	nil	nil
Total	3154 (10)	2419 (3)	2647 (4)	1935 (29)	1537 (7)	1905 (36)

NB - Catch figures in brackets are for sea trout

DCAL: Arm's-length Bodies

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the cost to her Department of its arm's-length bodies in each of the last two years.

(AQW 1945/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The table below details funding (either by grant or by grant in aid) provided to the Department's arm's length bodies in the financial years 2009-10 and 2010-11:

Arm's-length Body	2010-11 £'000s	2009-10 £'000s
Arts Council of Northern Ireland	27,178	27,481
National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland	24,499	17,462
Northern Ireland Library Authority	37,958	34,285
Sports Council for Northern Ireland	25,400	25,377
Waterways Ireland	4,667	5,521
North/South Language Body (comprising the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge)	6,978	6,909
Northern Ireland Museums Council Ltd	324	361
Armagh Observatory and Planetarium	2,055	1,530
Northern Ireland Screen Commission Ltd	1,378	1,450
Northern Ireland Events Company Ltd	94	1,127
Total Cost £'000s	130,531	121,503

DCAL: Special Adviser

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether her Special Adviser is paid within Band A or Band B of the Department of Finance and Personnel's salary scale; and, if it is within Band B whether, in light of the DFP decision to increase the upper limit of the Band B scale to £90,000, there has been an increase in salary or an increase is planned.

(AQW 1976/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL appointed a Special Adviser on 17th May 2011 and her salary has yet to be finalised.

Greystone Library

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the future of Greystone Library.

(AQW 1998/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The future of Greystone library was subject to recent public consultation as part of Libraries NI ongoing strategic Review of the libraries estate. Following this public consultation Libraries NI decided to postpone any library closure decisions until October 2011. I wish to emphasise that nothing has been finalised by the Libraries NI Board at this stage.

The possible closure of any public library is of great concern to me. I am acutely aware of the potential impact that such an action can have on the whole community that it serves.

However this is fundamentally an operational issue for Libraries NI; the Board of which includes councillors from my own party, the DUP, the SDLP and the UUP

It is essential that the Board and Senior Management Team of Libraries NI take careful consideration of their own initial 'fit for purpose' assessment of individual libraries, and also the information provided to them during the public consultation process, before they come to any final decision.

Libraries NI will keep me fully informed on the decision making process. This will help to ensure that the best decisions are taken in this very challenging financial environment.

Licensed Fishing Engines

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the effects of fishing engines on her Department's priority to manage salmon fisheries and their long-term sustainability.

(AQW 2080/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The central requirement for sustainability of any fishery is adequate survival of the fish population or stock to replace itself generation to generation and generate an exploitable surplus. Catching and removing fish from a population, by whatever means, will contribute to a reduction in survival at population level.

There is a wide range of complex factors that affect wild Atlantic salmon stocks, including habitat degradation, barriers to migration, poor water quality and predation. There is particular concern about the increase in mortality of salmon during the oceanic phase of their life cycle and international research is on-going to increase understanding of the factors influencing this trend.

The use of licensed fishing engines, be they commercial nets or rods used by recreational anglers, exploits wild salmon stocks and is regulated by the Department by virtue of powers contained in the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966. The Department continually monitors the status of wild salmon populations within its jurisdiction and based on scientific consideration of this evidence, new or additional conservation measures may be introduced.

Over recent years the Department has introduced a range of salmon conservation measures including compulsory catch and release in the early part of the angling season and restricting the commercial exploitation of salmon through a voluntary buy out schemes.

Re-imaging Communities Programme

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether any funding from the Re-imaging Communities Programme has been spent on murals in West Belfast depicting the hunger strikes.

(AQW 2142/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: No funding has been made available for murals in West Belfast depicting the hunger strikes.

Libraries: Reduced Opening Hours

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an estimate of the projected savings that will be made from the proposed reduced opening hours of libraries.

(AQW 2143/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I recognise that both my Department and its sponsored bodies have already had to take very difficult decisions in planning to live within reduced budget allocations over the next four years.

Libraries NI have commenced a review of Library opening hours which will allow Libraries NI to achieve the savings required, mainly through the reduction of staff costs.

The following table shows the estimated forecast of savings from these measures over the next four years.

Forecast of Savings Accruing from Savings Measure (£000's)

	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
Admin				
Resource	100	500	1563	2492
Total	100	500	1563	2492

Libraries: Expenditure

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail her Department's total expenditure on libraries in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2144/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Libraries NI was established on 1 April 2009 prior to which the public library service was administered by Education and Library Boards. The table below provides the figures for the total (resource and capital) expenditure on public libraries in each of the last five years:

Year	Spend on Libraries £000's
2006/07	32,867
2007/08	35,191
2008/09	34,055
2009/10	36,931
2010/11	38,049

Marching Bands

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding her Department plans to provide to marching bands over the next twelve months.

(AQW 2150/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has no plans to provide funding to marching bands in the next twelve months.

There are, however, a number of funds available through the Arts Council and the Ulster Scots Agency to which marching bands may apply for support in replacing instruments and for tuition.

Greenisland and Whitehead Libraries

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps she has taken, and intends to take, to secure the long-term futures of Greenisland and Whitehead libraries.

(AQW 2202/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I recognise the valuable contribution that the public library service makes to our local (both rural and urban) communities and I am fully committed to the provision of a comprehensive and efficient library service.

I also recognise that both my Department and its sponsored bodies have already had to take very difficult decisions in planning to live within reduced budget allocations over the next four years.

Libraries NI has recently started a Review of its opening hours. The purpose of this Review is to deliver the savings required while protecting a network of sustainable libraries into the future.

Greenisland and Whitehead Libraries

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what weight she will attach to the responses to the public consultation on the proposed reduction in the opening hours of Greenisland and Whitehead libraries.

(AQW 2203/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Board of Libraries NI has commenced a review of library opening hours, including those of Greenisland and Whitehead libraries.

I would emphasise that nothing has been finalised by the Libraries NI Board at this stage. A consultation has commenced and that will include a conversation with each community about when they would like to see their library opened. I would encourage people to take part in the consultation.

Consideration of the responses made during the public consultation is a matter for the Libraries NI Board.

Decisions will not be made until all the information from the consultation has been collated and presented to the Libraries NI Board. The Board of Libraries NI contains councillors from the DUP, the SDLP, my own party and the UUP.

Líofa 2015

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether the Líofa 2015 campaign will include efforts to de-politicise the Irish language.

(AQW 2249/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am keen to ensure that the Irish language is not seen as a threat to any member of our society. Part of the Líofa initiative is about breaking down the barriers and preconceptions which have surrounded the Irish Language, and opening Irish up to everyone.

Líofa 2015

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what analysis she has carried out into the view, set out in her Líofa 2015 press release, that some people have sought to portray the promotion of the Gaelic culture and Irish language as the preserve of one section of our community.

(AQW 2251/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: No formal analysis has been carried out.

Inland Waterways: Fish Poaching

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the extent of fish poaching in inland waterways in the Upper Bann constituency.

(AQW 2252/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Poaching is an illegal fishing activity and DCAL is concerned with any illegal fishing activity taking place throughout its operational area, which includes inland waterways in the Upper Bann constituency. The Department accepts that illegal fishing does take place in the Upper Bann constituency, particularly on the main rivers discharging to Lough Neagh and on Lough Neagh itself.

There is a wide range of complex factors that affect fish stocks and without precise and detailed information on the numbers of fish being taken by poachers or the numbers of poachers involved, it is difficult to give any meaningful assessment of the extent of poaching.

However, the loss of any adult fish has the immediate effect of reducing the numbers available for anglers and commercial fishermen and in the longer term reduces the potential breeding stock in that water.

Inland Waterways: Fish Stocks

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps her Department has taken to protect fish stocks in inland waterways in the Upper Bann constituency.

(AQW 2253/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL is concerned with any illegal fishing activity taking place throughout its operational area, which includes inland waterways in the Upper Bann constituency.

Illegal fishing activities take place in the Upper Bann constituency, particularly on the main rivers discharging to Lough Neagh and on Lough Neagh itself. A team of 3 DCAL Fisheries Protection Officers, under the management of a Senior Fisheries Officer operate from their base at Derrycrow covering the Upper Bann constituency and Lough Neagh itself.

When necessary a team of 2 Fishery Protection Officers operating out of Castlewellan and managed by a Senior Fisheries Officer can be called upon to assist and cooperate in operations dealing with illegal fishing activity in the Upper Bann constituency.

DCAL Fisheries Protection staff also work closely with local angling clubs, many of which have Private Water Bailiffs who play an important role in supporting the Department in combating illegal fishing activities.

DCAL Fisheries Protection staff undertakes regular patrols on land and water, on rivers, lakes and coastal areas throughout the DCAL operational area. They also carry out intelligence led operations to detect, disrupt and deter those involved in illegal fishing activities.

In addition Fisheries Protection Officers undertake inspections of fish dealers' premises and businesses selling fish such as hotels, restaurants and commercial outlets to ensure that those engaged comply fully with the 1966 Fisheries Act and Fisheries Regulations.

Gilford Library

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions she intends to have with Libraries NI prior to a final decision being made on the future of Gilford Library.

(AQW 2254/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The second stage of the Review of the public library estate, including the proposals regarding Gilford Library, is an operational issue for Libraries NI.

Libraries NI have already briefed me on the Review and have undertaken to brief me further in October before the Board makes final decisions.

Arts: Capital Projects

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what capital arts projects her Department plans to fund in each of the next three years; and to detail the amount of funding that will be allocated to each project.

(AQW 2290/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has no plans to fund capital arts projects over the next three years. There has been a significant investment in capital arts projects in recent years as a result of which there are a number of high quality arts venues across the north of Ireland including the Crescent Arts Centre, Lyric Theatre, Playhouse Theatre and Waterside Theatre.

There is however, capital funding of £200k available per year over the next three years for equipment and £200k for musical instruments for bands. This funding will be administered by the Arts Council.

Community Festival Fund

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the total funding allocated to the Community Festival Fund by her Department in each of the last three years, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 2293/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department allocates Community Festivals funding to the local councils and does not hold information at constituency level.

I have therefore listed the initial allocations to each council over the last three years. Figures may change slightly in year, due to underspends or overspends by councils in the previous year.

If you require a further breakdown, you should contact the councils directly.

Council	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011
Antrim	12,300	12,400	13,000
Ards	18,000	18,000	18,800
Armagh	13,700	13,700	14,300
Ballymena	15,600	15,600	16,300
Ballymoney	5,000	4,000	4,000
Banbridge	10,600	10,700	11,200
Belfast	77,300	77,300	79,000
Carrickfergus	9,700	9,700	10,000
Castlereagh	15,800	15,600	16,300
Coleraine	14,200	14,000	14,600

Council	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011
Cookstown	8,500	8,600	9,000
Craigavon	22,600	22,900	24,100
Derry	31,200	31,100	32,100
Down	16,500	16,500	17,200
Dungannon & South Tyrone	12,800	13,100	13,900
Fermanagh	15,000	15,100	15,700
Larne	8,000	8,390	8,200
Limavady	8,900	8,800	9,000
Lisburn	28,400	28,200	29,500
Magherafelt	9,900	9,900	10,500
Moyle	4,400	4,400	4,600
Newtownabbey	20,400	20,300	21,300
Newry & Mourne	25,400	25,700	26,900
North Down	18,600	4,000	4,000
Omagh	13,000	13,100	13,600
Strabane	12,400	12,400	12,700

Creative Industries

Ms Ruane asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the extent of her Department's engagement with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education in developing a Creative Industries Strategy.

(AQO 416/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is the government lead on the creative industries and as such seeks to work in partnership with all Departments and agencies to grow and develop this key sector.

The Departments mentioned in the question, along with agencies such as Invest NI, have a key role to play with DCAL in sustaining a creative pipeline from which creative ideas, creative people and creative businesses emerge.

My officials and Arms-Length Bodies such as the Arts Council and NI Screen work closely with these Departments to advance the skills agenda and support creative businesses.

Barriers remain to realising the potential of our creative industries. These include a diverse but fragmented sector but also a range of government interventions which, at times, lack effective co-ordination.

These are challenges which I aim to tackle. I will work with Ministerial and Assembly colleagues to develop a joined-up framework to support our creative industries.

Gaeltacht Quarter, Belfast

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the development of the Gaeltacht Quarter.

(AQO 419/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL part funded the capital project of An Cultúrlann which reopened on Monday, 19th September 2011 following a £2m extension and refurbishment project. The project has provided increased work and exhibition space, improved accessibility, gallery space and an enhanced tourist information area providing a wider range of services and products.

Any future Departmental expenditure in relation to the Gaeltacht Quarter will be subject to a business case.

Libraries: Rural Communities

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action she is taking to ensure that the service currently provided by small libraries in rural communities is maintained.

(AQO 420/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I recognise the valuable contribution that the public library service makes to our local communities and I remain fully committed to the provision of a comprehensive library service throughout the North of Ireland.

The recent Budget 2011-15 presents a challenge to all of my Department's sponsored bodies. The Board and Senior Management Team of Libraries NI had to consider how the public library service could be most effectively managed within available resources.

Library services in rural communities are being considered within Libraries NI's ongoing strategic Review of the libraries estate. I wish to emphasise that nothing has been finalised by the Libraries NI Board at this stage.

These reviews are operational matters for Libraries NI, the Board of which includes councillors from the DUP, the SDLP, my own party and the UUP.

A full public consultation on the Review proposals was carried out from January to April. The Board of Libraries NI will carefully consider the information collected during the process before they come to any final decision.

Libraries NI have informed me that they expect to be in a position to make final decisions regarding the Review in October.

Arts: Programme for Government

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she will support measures to promote the arts sector to be included in the Programme for Government.

(AQO 421/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I recognise the value of the arts and am mindful of the contribution of the arts to the north of Ireland's cultural development and tourism product.

Through partnership working with key stakeholders, customers and sectoral groups, DCAL will seek to develop and deliver programmes and services that achieve the policies of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Sectors. The Programme for Government is currently in the draft stages and I will ensure that my Department is represented within it as appropriate.

Following the public consultation on the draft budget, the resource funding for the Arts Council was increased by £2.75m over the four years of the budget - evidence of the Executive's appreciation for the hugely important role played by the arts in our society.

Famine Commemoration

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail her role in the National Famine Commemoration in Clones, County Monaghan on 10 September 2011.

(AQO 422/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I received an invitation from the National Famine Commemoration Committee to attend the National Famine Commemoration on the 10th September in Clones, Co Monaghan.

I was grateful to accept the invitation and attended the event as a guest.

Arts: STEM Subjects

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline her plans to promote the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) agenda through investment in the arts and culture.

(AQO 423/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: An exciting curriculum and inspirational learning experiences are crucial to engaging young people and maintaining an interest and motivation in STEM.

Promoting STEM is one of my priorities and my Department has a very important role through its investment in arts and culture. Examples include the learning environments, content, exhibitions and programmes provided by our museums, libraries, W5, Creative Learning Centres, and the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium.

These support and enhance delivery of the curriculum and provide STEM experiences and insights that inspire and add value to teachers and the learning experiences of students and lifelong learners.

My Department will also support implementation of the Executive's STEM strategy and further enhance the STEM offering across our sponsored bodies by implementing the DCAL Learning Strategy.

Tollymore National Outdoor Centre

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps she has taken to ensure that the funding her Department provides to the Tollymore National Outdoor Centre does not disadvantage other private outdoor activity providers in South Down.

(AQO 424/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am aware of the concerns of some private activity providers in South Down which alleged that Tollymore National Outdoor Centre is displacing activity from other outdoor providers in the area.

In order to address these concerns my Department brought forward the Post Project Evaluation for the Centre by 6 months. This work is currently being considered by my department, and I will wish to consider its recommendations carefully before asking Sport NI to implement them.

Sports Stadia

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the development of Casement Park, Ravenhill and Windsor Park.

(AQO 425/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Executive has provided a funding package of up to £110m in the current CSR period for regional stadium development. £25.2m is to be allocated to the IFA towards the redevelopment of Windsor Park to accommodate 18,000 spectators; £61.4m is to be allocated to the GAA who plan to build a new stadium at Casement Park to accommodate a maximum spectator capacity of 40,000; and £14.7m is to be made available to the Ulster Branch of the IRFU to enhance their stadium at Ravenhill to bring the capacity to 15,000 spectators.

Sport NI have actively engaged with the Governing Bodies to progress the structures and other arrangements essential to bring capital projects of this scale to fruition. The Sports' Governing Bodies have established Project Boards to progress their individual stadiums and take forward the day-to-day arrangements. Business Plans have been developed and key roles identified to take forward this work.

My department oversees this work, and is currently reviewing these arrangements to ensure that appropriate structures and management arrangements are in place to deliver fit-for-purpose regional stadiums to meet the future needs of the three sports.

Department of Education

Education: Common Funding Formula

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education why changes have been made to the common funding formula which now requires schools to meet the cost of a substitute teacher when the absent teacher moves onto half pay, while the Education and Library Board meets the cost of the absent teacher's salary.

(AQW 1702/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Changes have not been made to the Common Funding Formula arrangements for schools. Schools were consulted earlier this year on proposals for changes to the centre substitution arrangements as detailed in the Common Funding Scheme, which took effect from 1 September 2011. An outline of the changes, together with an associated Equality Impact Assessment, was provided to the Education Committee on 8 March 2011, followed on 17 August by an analysis and summary of responses to the consultation from schools.

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) in their follow-up report on The Management of Substitution Cover for Teachers raised serious concerns in relation to the continuing practice and cost of schools employing prematurely retired teachers. In addressing the PAC recommendations, my Department proposed a number of changes including making schools responsible for meeting the costs of a substitute teacher when the absent teacher moves onto half pay, with the funding authority meeting the cost of the absent teacher's salary

Prior to 1 September 2011, schools were able to make a saving when an absent teacher moved on to half pay (after 100 days' sick absence), as the cost of substitution continued to be met by the funding authority. It was only when the absent teacher moved on to no pay (after a further 100 days' sick absence) that the cost of substitution transferred to the school. This change to the common funding scheme is intended to address this anomaly and to serve as an incentive to schools to employ newly or recently qualified teachers as substitutes, thus effecting a reduction in overall expenditure on substitution. It should also provide additional encouragement to schools to pro-actively manage the return to work of the permanent teacher in line with the Teacher Attendance Procedure agreed at the Teachers' Negotiating Committee.

Schools: Unfilled Places

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of schools, funded by his Department, which have unfilled places; and (ii) the total number of unfilled places broken down by Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 1735/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In the academic year 2010-11 there were 1016 funded schools (including 25 nursery schools) which had unfilled places, out of 1161 schools (including 98 nursery schools). There were a total of 84,605 unfilled places (including 119 unfilled places in nursery schools) distributed across the Education and Library Board areas as follows:-

Belfast Board	Western Board	North-Eastern Board	South-Eastern Board	Southern Board
16,072	18,755	17,109	15,800	16,869

The figures exclude the enrolments of 9563 pupils in receipt of a statement of special educational needs, and 138 pupils admitted on appeal by the Education and Library Board appeal tribunals or by direction of the independent Exceptional Circumstances Body, as they are admitted over and above a school's approved enrolment number.

Schools: Expenditure

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, for each of the last three years, to detail the spend in the (i) maintained; (ii) controlled; (iii) Irish-medium; (iv) voluntary grammar; and (v) integrated sectors, broken down by (a) primary school and post-primary school; and (b) Education and Library Board.

(AQW 1738/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The latest full financial year for which this data is available is 2009/10. The total amount of recurrent expenditure for each of the education sectors and phases in each of the financial years 2007/08, 2008/09 and 2009/10 is shown in the tables below.

BELFAST EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

Belfast ELB			
School Type	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2007/08 £	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2008/09 £	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2009/10 £
Controlled Nursery	2,972,912	3,900,505	2,865,011
Maintained Nursery	3,414,390	3,596,191	3,672,206
Controlled Primary	36,697,608	39,240,442	34,215,777
Controlled Integrated Primary	588,216	1,908,572	2,298,633
Controlled Irish Medium Primary	300,080	275,575	-
Maintained Primary	38,393,740	38,761,567	39,524,851
Irish Medium Primary	3,712,497	3,975,195	4,194,760
Controlled Secondary	24,299,581	23,205,270	20,162,674
Controlled Integrated Secondary	-	-	-
Controlled Grammar	7,842,098	8,145,645	8,201,201
Maintained Secondary	42,535,414	41,250,546	41,819,099
Irish Medium Secondary	2,124,752	2,706,299	2,606,784
Voluntary Grammar	62,373,725	65,123,386	66,413,019
Grant-Maintained Integrated Primary	1,984,109	2,262,053	2,253,427

Belfast ELB			
School Type	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2007/08 £	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2008/09 £	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2009/10 £
Grant-Maintained Integrated Secondary	7,914,228	8,392,905	8,869,135
Total	235,153,350	242,744,151	237,096,577

NORTH-EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

North-Eastern ELB			
School Type	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2007/08 £	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2008/09 £	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2009/10 £
Controlled Nursery	3,091,406	3,232,729	3,295,001
Maintained Nursery	413,265	414,475	450,626
Controlled Primary	71,515,541	74,739,065	75,151,896
Controlled Integrated Primary	2,624,232	2,856,512	3,883,565
Maintained Primary	37,127,452	38,752,506	40,276,335
Irish Medium Primary	413,889	614,952	848,778
Controlled Secondary	47,926,182	50,448,416	50,164,552
Controlled Integrated Secondary	1,698,434	1,725,601	1,704,726
Controlled Grammar	19,054,984	20,089,476	20,447,151
Maintained Secondary	29,139,500	31,635,729	32,117,719
Irish Medium Secondary	-	-	-
Voluntary Grammar	38,739,257	40,236,094	40,936,798
Grant-Maintained Integrated Primary	3,809,197	4,104,706	4,171,922
Grant-Maintained Integrated Secondary	10,429,183	10,799,539	11,062,690
Total	265,982,522	279,649,800	284,511,759

SOUTH EASTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

South Eastern ELB			
School Type	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2007/08 £	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2008/09 £	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2009/10 £
Controlled Nursery	2,047,436	2,259,897	2,468,081

South Eastern ELB			
School Type	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2007/08 £	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2008/09 £	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2009/10 £
Maintained Nursery	1,581,362	1,753,507	1,675,007
Controlled Primary	71,295,955	77,544,709	74,365,906
Controlled Integrated Primary	4,113,852	4,395,076	4,741,449
Maintained Primary	34,503,129	35,142,488	37,154,754
Irish Medium Primary	697,506	725,617	745,539
Controlled Secondary	37,282,936	40,409,886	41,027,822
Controlled Integrated Secondary	7,296,830	7,369,209	6,667,415
Controlled Grammar	15,470,581	15,240,639	15,933,600
Maintained Secondary	21,956,717	22,965,131	23,594,964
Irish Medium Secondary	-	-	-
Voluntary Grammar	30,129,799	31,406,199	32,143,269
Grant-Maintained Integrated Primary	3,867,670	4,227,973	4,559,198
Grant-Maintained Integrated Secondary	10,041,707	12,020,921	13,350,072
Total	240,285,480	255,461,252	258,427,076

SOUTHERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

Southern ELB			
School Type	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2007/08 £	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2008/09 £	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2009/10 £
Controlled Nursery	2,772,279	2,713,607	2,665,138
Maintained Nursery	1,194,567	1,231,705	1,218,289
Controlled Primary	47,823,057	49,475,784	50,149,418
Controlled Integrated Primary	330,505	343,680	407,528
Maintained Primary	73,560,346	77,775,227	81,043,215
Irish Medium Primary	738,455	795,937	888,604
Controlled Secondary	40,479,328	42,330,415	42,354,731
Controlled Integrated Secondary	2,123,705	2,218,766	2,297,643

Southern ELB			
School Type	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2007/08 £	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2008/09 £	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2009/10 £
Controlled Grammar	10,415,346	11,007,569	11,576,633
Maintained Secondary	55,768,541	58,359,863	60,314,246
Irish Medium Secondary	-	-	-
Voluntary Grammar	37,661,532	39,340,216	39,514,518
Grant-Maintained Integrated Primary	4,026,617	4,567,406	4,461,905
Grant-Maintained Integrated Secondary	6,403,227	6,599,650	5,655,311
Total	283,297,505	296,759,825	302,547,179

WESTERN EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD

Western ELB			
School Type	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2007/08 £	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2008/09 £	Total Recurrent Expenditure 2009/10 £
Controlled Nursery	2,736,839	2,960,145	2,722,351
Maintained Nursery	-	-	-
Controlled Primary	30,842,081	34,769,972	32,480,529
Controlled Integrated Primary	170,892	194,118	193,822
Maintained Primary	65,757,472	68,043,941	70,115,733
Irish Medium Primary	1,581,982	1,875,232	2,101,465
Controlled Secondary	24,694,495	21,122,162	19,544,837
Controlled Integrated Secondary	-	-	-
Controlled Grammar	10,915,226	12,155,969	11,399,747
Maintained Secondary	52,431,577	56,648,248	57,818,298
Irish Medium Secondary	-	-	-
Voluntary Grammar	38,145,288	39,263,416	39,685,089
Grant-Maintained Integrated Primary	3,536,397	3,963,011	4,034,791
Grant-Maintained Integrated Secondary	9,200,537	10,008,927	10,161,664
Total	240,012,786	251,005,141	250,258,326

Schools: Pupil Capacity

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, for each of the last three years, including this financial year, to detail the pupil capacity in the (i) maintained; (ii) controlled; (iii) Irish-medium; (iv) voluntary grammar; and (v) integrated sectors, broken down by (a) primary school and post-primary school; and (b) Education and Library Board; and how many of those spaces were not filled.

(AQW 1746/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Details of school pupil capacities and the number of places which were unfilled in each of the last 3 years, are set out in the attached tables:-

(1) POST-PRIMARY

2010-11

Post-Primary	Controlled (Note a)	Maintained	Irish Medium	Vol Grammar	Integrated (Note b)
BELB					
Capacity	5,760	9,419	585	14,556	1,625
Unfilled Places	564	1,923	48	232	108
WELB					
Capacity	6,695	12,540	0	8,590	1,780
Unfilled Places	950	2,970	0	193	18
NEELB					
Capacity	15,685	7,465	0	8,560	3,355
Unfilled Places	2,418	778	0	143	341
SEELB					
Capacity	11,422	5,210	0	6,855	3,880
Unfilled Places	1,684	1,017	0	17	172
SELB					
Capacity	12,277	13,269	0	8,525	1,450
Unfilled Places	1,747	2,272	0	50	136
Totals					
Capacity	51,839	47,903	585	47,086	12,090
Unfilled Places	7,363	8,960	48	635	775

2009-10

Post-Primary	Controlled (Note a)	Maintained	Irish Medium	Vol Grammar	Integrated (Note b)
BELB					
Capacity	5,770	9,449	585	14,556	1,590
Unfilled Places	540	1,723	32	294	94

Post-Primary	Controlled (Note a)	Maintained	Irish Medium	Vol Grammar	Integrated (Note b)
WELB					
Capacity	6,695	12,650	0	8,660	1,780
Unfilled Places	796	3,069	0	286	13
NEELB					
Capacity	15,685	7,465	0	9,170	3,355
Unfilled Places	2,369	778	0	212	297
SEELB					
Capacity	11,462	5,210	0	6,870	3,880
Unfilled Places	1,617	1,081	0	36	166
SELB					
Capacity	12,277	13,374	0	8,545	1,450
Unfilled Places	1,770	2,338	0	64	145
Totals					
Capacity	51,889	48,298	585	47,801	12,055
Unfilled Places	7,092	9,784	32	892	715

2008-09

Post-Primary	Controlled (Note a)	Maintained	Irish Medium	Vol Grammar	Integrated (Note b)
BELB					
Capacity	6,375	9,479	570	14,580	1,590
Unfilled Places	1075	1,685	62	308	44
WELB					
Capacity	6,695	12,670	0	8,690	1,780
Unfilled Places	796	2,984	0	288	7
NEELB					
Capacity	16,810	7,615	0	9,170	2,610
Unfilled Places	2,538	1,648	0	263	227
SEELB					
Capacity	11,882	5,210	0	6,920	3,870
Unfilled Places	1,912	1,110	0	66	180
SELB					
Capacity	12,277	13,459	0	8,575	1,690
Unfilled Places	1,727	2,360	0	65	298

Post-Primary	Controlled (Note a)	Maintained	Irish Medium	Vol Grammar	Integrated (Note b)
TOTALS					
Capacity	54,039	48,433	570	47,935	11,540
Unfilled Places	8,048	9,787	62	990	756

(2) PRIMARY**2010-11**

Primary	Controlled	Maintained	Irish Medium	Integrated (Note b)
BELB				
Capacity	14,389	17,213	1,388	1,197
Unfilled Places	5,855	6,596	506	233
WELB				
Capacity	11,635	27,777	521	1,172
Unfilled Places	4,106	10,271	122	91
NEELB				
Capacity	28,754	15,375	315	3,359
Unfilled Places	7,714	4,503	75	1,078
SEELB				
Capacity	26,021	14,570	232	2,793
Unfilled Places	7,531	5,036	68	259
SELB				
Capacity	18,632	27,979	274	1,384
Unfilled Places	5,529	6,948	26	158
Totals				
Capacity	99,431	102,914	2,730	9,905
Unfilled Places	30,735	33,354	797	1,819

2009-10

Primary	Controlled	Maintained	Irish Medium	Integrated (Note b)
BELB				
Capacity	14,582	17,212	1,367	1,197
Unfilled Places	6,049	6,541	456	244
WELB				
Capacity	11,635	27,849	496	1,136
Unfilled Places	3,938	10,232	119	86

Primary	Controlled	Maintained	Irish Medium	Integrated (Note b)
NEELB				
Capacity	29,462	15,435	243	2,982
Unfilled Places	8,075	4,542	50	897
SEELB				
Capacity	25,927	14,585	232	2,706
Unfilled Places	7,418	5,061	59	236
SELB				
Capacity	18,585	28,265	274	1,359
Unfilled Places	5,573	7,313	38	130
Totals				
Capacity	100,191	103,346	2,612	9,380
Unfilled Places	31,053	33,689	722	1,593

2008-09

Primary	Controlled	Maintained	Irish Medium	Integrated (Note c)
BELB				
Capacity	14,699	17,214	1,350	1,197
Unfilled Places	5,924	6,093	397	225
WELB				
Capacity	11,635	28,174	398	1,113
Unfilled Places	3,604	9,817	58	76
NEELB				
Capacity	29,844	15,434	189	2,543
Unfilled Places	8,034	4,250	32	743
SEELB				
Capacity	26,814	14,523	232	2,428
Unfilled Places	7,597	4,662	55	133
SELB				
Capacity	18,624	28,212	254	1,305
Unfilled Places	5,259	6,698	25	48
TOTALS				
Capacity	101,616	103,557	2,423	8,585
Unfilled Places	30,418	31,520	567	1,228

Notes

- (a) numbers include controlled grammar schools
- (b) numbers include controlled integrated post-primary schools
- (c) numbers include controlled integrated primary schools

Pupils in primary and post-primary schools who are in receipt of a statement of special educational needs, or who were (in the last year) admitted on appeal by the Education and Library Board appeal tribunals or by direction of the independent Exceptional Circumstances Body, are “supernumerary”. In the context of the data above this means they are not counted within the number of occupied places within a school. In 2010-11 there were 9,499 pupils in mainstream primary and post-primary schools with a statement of special educational needs, and 119 further supernumerary pupils who were admitted on appeal by the Education and Library Board appeal tribunals or by direction of the independent Exceptional Circumstances Body.

School enrolment figures can only be collected with reference to academic years because they are significantly determined by the annual admissions process that precede each academic year. The figures provided reflect the census returns of individual academic years. Figures for the 2011-12 academic year will not be available until after the annual schools’ census exercise has been completed in October 2011.

School Buses

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Education (i) what criteria is used by the Education and Library Boards and Translink to determine the bus routes for school buses; and (ii) what changes have been made to the school bus routes in the North Antrim area since the end of the 2010/11 academic year.

(AQW 1806/11-15)

Mr O’Dowd: Designated school buses are provided within the home to school transport scheme, by the Education and Library Boards, by private operators and by Translink.

Routes for Education and Library Boards buses and those hired from private operators are determined by a number of factors such as: - the number of eligible pupils, their age, physical needs and distribution; the opening and closing times of schools; the length of journey, the suitability of routes; the ability to undertake more than one trip and the efficient use of resources and cost comparisons relating to other modes of transport assistance available.

Routes for Translink designated school buses are determined by the need to maximise operational scheduling efficiency between standard timetabled public services and the additional provision required during school terms to provide transport for both eligible and non-eligible pupils from different educational sectors to travel to various schools. Routes also vary as to whether designated buses start or finish at educational establishments or if they can double trip for a more efficient service. Pupils may use a combination of services for their journey to and from school.

Routes remain largely unaltered, unless affected by a rise or decline in a school’s popularity. Routes may also vary due to road works and weather conditions. The only significant changes to date to routes in the North Antrim area for the 2011/12 school year have involved Translink buses - a double-deck bus was introduced on the Ballymena to Rasharkin (service 115) service in the afternoon and the Marshall’s Cross to Ballymena (service 123) was merged with the Millquarter bus.

Home Schooling

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education (i) how many children are registered for home schooling, broken down by children of (a) primary school age; and (b) post-primary school age; and (ii) how this figure compares to the figure five years ago.

(AQW 1914/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Parents can choose to home educate and there is no legal requirement for them to advise their Education and Library Board (ELB) or the Department of their decision. The information in the following table has been provided by the Boards and is based on notifications received that a child is being home educated. These notifications may have been made by parents, a child's previous school, a Board's Transfer Department or its Education Welfare Service. The numbers being home educated fluctuate during the course of a year. Therefore, the figures provided by the ELBs reflect a snapshot in time on the date on which a request is made.

	2006/07			2010/11		
	Primary Age	Post-Primary Age	Total	Primary Age	Post-Primary Age	Total
BELB	2	3	5	6	2	8
NEELB	34	26	60	33	16	49
SEELB	18	4	22	27	18	45
SELB	5	20	25	13	18	31
WELB	26	19	45	25	18	43
Total	85	72	157	104	72	176

DE: Special Adviser

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education whether his Special Adviser is paid within Band A or Band B of the Department of Finance and Personnel's salary scale; and, if it is within Band B, whether, in light of the DFP decision to increase the upper limit of the Band B scale to £90,000, there has been an increase in salary or an increase is planned.

(AQW 1980/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The salary level for my Special Adviser has not yet been agreed.

Northern Ireland Youth Forum

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education for an update on the future funding of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum.

(AQW 1984/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department of Education does not fund the Youth Forum directly. The Forum is funded by the Youth Council, which is responsible for funding Regional Voluntary Youth Organisations (RVYOs). The Forum can also access funding from other programmes and initiatives from a variety of organisations.

The Chief Executive of the Youth Council has advised that it provides approximately £2.5m to RVYOs on an annual basis. The funding is available to organisations who meet the Youth Council's criteria under different funding streams.

In the 2011/12 financial year, the Youth Forum has been allocated approximately £103,000 to date by the Youth Council, without competition as a result of one provision contained within DE Circular 1979/10 'Greater Involvement of Young People in the Youth Service'.

The withdrawal of the 1979 DE circular will not impact on the ability of the Forum to carry on providing services for young people. Transitional arrangements will be put in place by the Youth Council from 1st April 2012 for a period not lasting more than 24 months to help the Forum prepare for new arrangements, after which time the Forum can apply to the Youth Council for funding in the same way as other Regional Voluntary Youth Organisations do.

DE: Capital Projects in East Antrim

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education what capital projects are planned for the East Antrim area in the next three years.

(AQW 1985/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am not currently in a position to indicate which major capital investment projects will be taken forward in the next three years. My Department is faced with significant reductions in the capital budget available over the next four years and this will impact on the ability to deliver new school building projects.

As I outlined in my statement to the Assembly on Monday 26 September, I must be certain that we are investing our resources in the right schools. I have asked the managing authorities to conduct a viability audit to be submitted before the end of the year, and I have commissioned the Education and Library Boards, working with CCMS, to co-ordinate a strategic planning exercise based on each Board area to shape the future pattern of education delivery.

Any proposals for future capital investment must be founded in an area plan agreed by the sectors and approved by my Department.

School Bus Routes: Upper Bann

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education what changes have been made to the school bus routes in the Upper Bann area since the end of the 2010/11 academic year.

(AQW 2006/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Southern Education and Library Board has informed me that from 1 September 2011 approximately 110 pupils in the Upper Bann area attending Banbridge Academy, 110 pupils attending Newbridge Integrated College and 20 pupils attending Dromore High School have been allocated seats on Board buses and will no longer be issued with Translink bus passes. These changes are part of the Board's on-going review of operations to ensure that services represent efficient use of resources. All other dedicated school bus routes operated by the Board remain the same and Translink has confirmed that no changes have been made to their dedicated school bus routes.

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Education how much funding his Department has allocated to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2042/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Funding has been allocated from my Department to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment in each of the last three years as follows:

Year	Resource £'000	Capital £'000	Total £'000
2008/09	22,602	385	22,987
2009/10	21,422	215	21,637
2010/11	20,770	86	20,856

Notes:

1. Resource budget reflects net position (i.e. gross budget less income)
2. Figures include non-cash element in respect of depreciation

Teacher Training Days

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education whether he will request that schools arrange teacher training days, as far as possible, during periods when the school is closed to avoid disruption to pupils' education.

(AQW 2058/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: All grant aided schools must be open to pupils for 190 days, less any School Development Days (SDDs) which the school decides to take. Schools may take up to 5 SDDs for the purposes of self evaluation and continuing professional development. Where a school decides not to use all or some of its SDDs it must remain open as normal to pupils.

I am mindful of the need to balance the training and development needs of school staff with avoiding undue disruption to pupil's learning. Schools must therefore ensure that any planned SDDs are justified and co-ordinated between themselves and the education support bodies.

In addition to these days when schools are closed to all pupils, teachers may also engage in training and development which requires time out from their classroom duties. On these occasions schools may decide to engage the services of a substitute teacher to keep the disruption to pupils' education to a minimum.

Teachers are also engaged for 5 days per year in whole school training and development which are additional to the 190 days they must be open to pupils. These days are more commonly referred to as "Baker Days" and do not impact on pupil education.

Schools: Expulsions

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how many pupils have been expelled from primary schools and post-primary schools in each of the last three years, broken down by (i) Education and Library Board (ii) maintained; (iii) voluntary grammar; (iv) grant maintained; and (v) Irish medium schools.

(AQW 2109/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department collects expulsion statistics from each of the Education and Library Boards annually. The statistics for the last school year, 2010/11, are currently being analysed by the Department. A summary of the data will be published on the Department's website (www.deni.gov.uk) in due course.

For the purpose of statistical collection, school management types are amalgamated into three groups: 'controlled', 'Catholic maintained' or 'other'. The 'other' classification includes grant maintained and controlled integrated schools, voluntary grammar schools and other maintained schools. Therefore, the Department does not hold expulsion information broken down at the level requested.

In line with the confidentiality principle of the Statistics Authority's 'Code of Practice on Official Statistics', small numbers are suppressed to prevent the identification of an individual. Should the statistics be broken down by school management type and Education and Library Board, the vast majority of the data would be suppressed, rendering the information meaningless.

The table below shows the number of pupils expelled broken down by school management type for the previous three school years:

PUPILS EXPELLED BY SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TYPE:

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Controlled	*	10	*
Catholic Maintained	16	17	12
Other	#	9	#

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Total	25	36	22

Notes:

1. Figures include pupils undertaking Key Stages 1 to 4. For special schools pupils, curriculum year is used as a proxy for key stage.
2. * denotes figures less than 5.
3. # denotes a figure which has been treated to prevent disclosure of small numbers elsewhere.

Education and Skills Authority Implementation Team

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education (i) for an update on the contract for the Chief Executive designate of the Education and Skills Authority Implementation Team; and (ii) to detail the cost of the Team to date.

(AQW 2110/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department does not provide information on the employment details of individual members of staff. However, the Chief Executive (designate) post was advertised on the basis of a 5 year fixed-term appointment, renewable subject to review. The costs of the Education and Skills Authority Implementation team are as follows:

	05-06 £'000	06-07 £'000	07-08 £'000	08-09 £'000	09-10 £'000	10-11 £'000	11-12 April to August (5 months)	Totals £'000
ESA Implementation Team	-	258	1,032	1,909	2,697	2,314	609	8,819

Education and Skills Authority Implementation Team

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education (i) to detail the number of (a) directors; (b) management; and (c) staff in the Education and Skills Authority Implementation Team; and (ii) to outline their contract details.

(AQW 2111/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Skills Authority Implementation Team (ESAIT) is headed by the Chief Executive (Designate) of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA), who is also currently interim Chief Executive of CCEA.

Six Directors (Designate) were selected through a recruitment competition. Pending the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority, they remain employed by other education organisations. One of the Directors (Designate) is seconded full time to the Education and Skills Authority Implementation Team (ESAIT). The employers of the remaining five are reimbursed for any work they do on behalf of ESAIT.

Additionally, there are three staff at NICS Grade 6/7, one of whom is currently on unpaid leave.

Four full-time and four part-time staff work on specific projects in HR, Finance, ICT and Irish Medium education.

There are a further 10 support staff (including one part-time and one on a career break).

The Department does not release details of the employment circumstances of individuals.

Education: Ministerial Meetings

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how many meetings he has had with organisations since taking up office.

(AQW 2112/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Since taking up office, I have had twenty eight meetings with various organisations.

Education: Ministerial Meetings

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how many times he has met with (i) the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards; and (ii) the acting Chief Executive of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.

(AQW 2113/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Since taking up office, I have met with each of the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards (ELB's) once. I have met with the acting Chief Executive of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) on three occasions, two of which were as part of a larger delegation.

You will wish to note that Chief Executives are designated as the ELB's Accounting Officer by the Department of Education's Accounting Officer (Permanent Secretary) and are responsible directly to him for safeguarding the public funds for which they have charge; for ensuring propriety and regularity in the handling of those public funds; and for the day to day operation of the ELB.

I have also met with the Chairpersons of each of the ELBs and CCMS. They are responsible to me as Minister, their key role being to ensure that their Board's policies and actions support my wider strategic policies; and that their Board's affairs are conducted with probity.

Schools: Recycling

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education what policies are in place to encourage recycling in the school estate.

(AQW 2130/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department's Education & Library Boards have an Environmental Policy and Improvement Programme in place which focuses on improving the sustainability of operations across the schools' estate including procurement, energy consumption, transport, waste, recycling, water, paper and bio-diversity.

In respect of procurement, the Department and its arms-length bodies utilise CPD Guidance as standard and follow sustainable procurement practices to ensure that in all new construction projects a minimum of 10% of material value is derived from recycled or re-used content; that timber is from sustainable sources and that the over-arching design promotes low energy and water consumption, with low carbon emissions.

At school level, Boards act in partnership with Councils to promote recycling in a number of ways. These include:

- Support for delivery of waste education and training programmes.
- Development of financial incentives through differential charging which increase waste recovery rates across schools and kitchens.
- Support for Eco-schools' initiatives through the provision of qualified in-house assessors and other practical support.

The Boards also support the work of the Environmental Education Forum, a key element in developing an over-riding framework for waste education.

In relation to the classroom, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has been integrated into the revised curriculum for all key stages in the North of Ireland. At Primary level, ESD is built into the statutory area of learning 'The World Around Us' (Geography, Science and Technology). At Key Stage 3, it is included in the statutory areas of 'Learning for Life and Work' (Local and Global Citizenship, Employability), 'Environment and Society' (Geography and History) and Science and Technology.

Through ESD, pupils will explore issues such as environmental and climate change and the need to manage human impact on the environment. They will come to understand the interdependence of society, the economy and the environment; to develop respect for the needs of both present and future generations and to act towards promoting an improved environment.

Schools: Students Repeating Upper Sixth Year

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the level of funding allocated to schools in each of the last three years for students repeating Upper Sixth Year, compared with the level of funding allocated for students undertaking Upper Sixth Year for the first time; (ii) how many students repeated Upper Sixth Year in the 2010/11 academic year, broken down by Education and Library Board area; and (iii) whether there is any departmental policy on re-admittance to students who wish to repeat Upper Sixth Year.

(AQW 2163/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested is as follows.

- (i) Pupils in Year 15, who are not over age*, receive the same level of funding as those pupils undertaking Upper Sixth Year for the first time (Year 14 pupils). Pupils will count for core Age Weighted Pupil Unit funding, premises related per pupil funding and any other additional factors relying on pupil counts, in the same way as all other sixth form pupils. In the current 2011/12 financial year, the core per pupil element for such pupils in Year 15 is £2,041.01 x 2.18 (the same as pupils in year 13 or year 14).

Note: * Over age pupils are those pupils who have attained the age of 19 before 2 July, prior to the start of a school year, and these pupils are weighted zero in the calculation of a school's budget share.

- (ii) The number of pupils registered in schools at the last Census (October 2010), broken down by Education and Library Board area is shown on the table below. The annual school census collects information on the number of pupils in Year 15 and does not separately identify those pupils in Year 15 who are repeating A-level. However, it is likely that the majority of pupils in Year 15 are pupils who stay on to repeat their studies in Upper Sixth Year.

YEAR 15 PUPILS

ELB	Total pupils
Belfast	56
Western	21
North Eastern	18
South Eastern	42
Southern	15
Total	152

Source: NI school census.

Note:

- Figures relate to pupils in Year 15 with highest level of study at A-level or equivalent.
- While it is likely that the majority of pupils recorded as Year 15 are repeating A-level, it may be the case that some are not.

The Department is not able to distinguish those cases where pupils are repeating A-level from the data it holds.

(iii) In relation to overage retention of pupils the Department's view is that

- a person should not be enrolled in a school if he/she is over 18 years of age, except on transfer from another school;
- a pupil should not be retained in a school beyond the end of the school year following his/her 19th birthday;
- a pupil aged 19 years and over who wishes to continue, or return to, full-time education should be registered at institutions of further education;
- an exception may be granted due to special circumstances e.g. if a pupil had missed a year due to illness.

A school's Board of Governors is entirely responsible for setting the admissions criteria required for the re-admittance of a pupil to repeat the upper sixth year and for deciding whether or not to accept a pupil.

Schools: Transport

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Education what payments A Level students receive to compensate them for travelling to schools and colleges using their own transport.

(AQW 2177/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: All transport assistance provided to 'A' level students attending grant aided schools is provided in accordance with Department of Education Circular 1996/41 – School Transport (updated 2009). The Education and Library Boards provide transport assistance in a variety of ways, including the payment of a car allowance in certain circumstances, but only where this is compatible with the efficient use of resources. Where pupils are deemed eligible and awarded transport assistance on an Ulsterbus service the Board will consider providing a car allowance in lieu of the pass on request. Any payment will not exceed the cost of an individual Ulsterbus pass of £649.39.

The further education home to college transport budget is administered by the Education and Library Boards on behalf of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) to facilitate the attendance of students following a full-time course at a further education college. Those who are under 19 years of age on the day they commence their course of study and whose home is located over the statutory distance of three miles from any college are eligible for travel assistance. Students receive an annual travel ticket for use on public transport or, alternatively, students who chose to use their own cars can receive financial assistance up to the same value of the travel ticket which is £649.39.

Students aged 18 and over attending further education colleges may also be eligible for assistance with travel costs through the Hardship Fund, which is means tested. Funding is based on actual public transport costs. For students whose cheapest option is to travel by car, the college will calculate the travel costs based on a travel rate of 25p per mile.

Schools: Cleaning Services

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education to detail the total cost of cleaning services for (i) primary schools; and (ii) post-primary schools in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2182/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

Year	2008/09 (000s)	2009/10 (000s)	2010/11 (000s)	Total (000s)
Primary	11,066	11,913	11,997	34,976

Year	2008/09 (000s)	2009/10 (000s)	2010/11 (000s)	Total (000s)
Post Primary	13,010	13,503	13,539	40,052
Total	24,076	25,416	25,536	75,028

The above details relate to controlled and maintained schools managed by Education and Library Boards. Information in respect of Voluntary Grammar Schools and Grant Maintained Integrated Schools is not readily available and an exercise to provide this would result in disproportionate cost

Early Years (0-6) Strategy

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education (i) for an update on the implementation of the Early Years (0-6) Strategy; and (ii) how it will be linked to the proposed Childcare Strategy.

(AQW 2197/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Departmental officials are currently considering the nearly 2,000 responses to the consultation on the draft Early Years (0-6) Strategy. In addition, my Department has established a Stakeholder Advisory Group to contribute to the way forward for the Strategy. The Group has met twice to date and will meet again in November. I intend to publish the Strategy as soon as possible. However, it is important that the views raised in the consultation are fully considered before establishing the way forward .

OFMDFM officials are working on the development of a Childcare Strategy. In finalising the draft Strategy, officials will take account of any proposals on a Childcare Strategy.

Education Maintenance Allowance

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on any work his Department has carried out in relation to the Education Maintenance Allowance.

(AQW 2198/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department shares responsibility with the Department of Employment and Learning for the development of policy on the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) Scheme. Both Departments, last year, commissioned a review of the policy which was carried out by Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC). The review raised a number of issues about the scheme which need to be considered, particularly, in light of the current budgetary position.

You will also be aware that the Executive, at its meeting on 8 September 2011, agreed that my Department and the Department of Employment and Learning should undertake an urgent review of the EMA Scheme, with a view to bringing proposals to the Executive in the autumn, and that any expected savings flowing from such a review should, in the first instance, be used to address the balance of the funding gap held centrally as a consequence of the Executive's decision on university tuition fees. This review will build on the work done by PWC.

I have agreed, with the Minister for Employment and Learning, to the establishment of a joint project team (consisting of DE and DEL officials) to take forward work on the review. I am currently considering the terms of reference for the team and a timeline for their work. The timeline takes account of the Executive's request for proposals to be presented to them in the autumn.

The project team will be reporting on progress to me and to the Minister for Employment and Learning. I will keep the Education Committee informed of developments and will seek their views before any final decisions are made.

Nursery School Places

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education how many children were unable to obtain a nursery school place in each of the last five years in the (i) Craigavon Borough Council area; (ii) Banbridge District Council area.

(AQW 2218/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Funded pre-school places are available in statutory nursery schools and nursery units attached to primary schools and in voluntary/private settings in receipt of funding under the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme. Both sectors are equally valued with each following the same pre-school curriculum and being subject to the same inspection standards.

The aim of the Programme is to provide a funded pre-school place for every child, in their final pre-school year, whose parent wishes to avail of it.

It is not possible to determine the number of children who did not get a place in a nursery school as, in applying for a funded place, parents are invited to list a number of preferences across the range of statutory and voluntary/private providers. When a setting is unable to accommodate a child the application is passed on to the next provider on the parent's list of preferences. A child is not considered to be unplaced until all parental preferences on an application form have been exhausted.

The table below, therefore, shows the number of children, in their final pre-school year, who did not get a pre-school place in any DE funded setting in the

Craigavon Borough and Banbridge District Council areas in the last five years:

CRAIGAVON BOROUGH COUNCIL

Year	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
No. of Unplaced Children	69	51	124	108	9

BANBRIDGE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Year	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
No. of Unplaced Children	38	77	42	37	8

Academic Selection

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 1669/11-15, to list the schools which have used academic selection in each of the last five years 'to prevent young people from accessing' them.

(AQW 2219/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The table below contains a list of the schools that have used academic admissions criteria, in the majority of cases referenced to a test, in the last five years. Entrance tests can present a barrier to children for reasons other than purely academic ability. The stress associated with unnecessary testing is, in itself, an obstacle to some children. Coaching, which appears to be widely available and may improve performance in tests, is only accessible to those families' who can afford it, placing some young people at a disadvantage in competing for places in these schools. This may explain the relatively low percentage of pupils in receipt of free school meals in selective schools compared to the percentage of such pupils in non-selective schools.

It is wrong that many young people continue to be disadvantaged in this way, but I am pleased to note that some schools have moved away from academic selection within the last couple of years and would urge others to follow their lead.

Schools that have used Academic Admissions Criteria in each of the last five years,

- Antrim Grammar School
- Ballyclare High School
- Ballymena Academy
- Belfast High School
- Cambridge House Grammar School
- Carrickfergus Grammar School
- Coleraine Academical Institution
- Coleraine High School
- Dalriada School
- Dominican College, Portstewart
- Larne Grammar School
- Loreto College, Coleraine
- Rainey Endowed School
- St Louis Grammar School, Ballymena
- St Mary's Grammar School, Magherafelt
- Slemish College (bi-lateral school, 35% admitted using academic criteria)
- Christian Brothers' Grammar School, Omagh
- Collegiate Grammar School, Enniskillen
- Foyle and Londonderry College
- Limavady Grammar School
- Loreto Grammar School, Omagh
- Lumen Christi College
- Mount Lourdes Grammar School
- Omagh Academy
- Portora Royal School
- Thornhill College
- St Columb's College
- St Michael's College, Enniskillen
- Strabane Grammar School – now part of the new controlled post-primary school, Strabane (bi-lateral school admitting 50% of pupils using academic selection since September 2011)
- St Patrick's Grammar School, Armagh
- Armagh Royal School
- Banbridge Academy
- St Joseph's Grammar School, Dungannon
- St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon
- Royal School, Dungannon
- Abbey Christian Brothers' School, Newry
- Our Lady's Grammar School, Newry

- Sacred Heart Grammar School, Newry
- St Colman's College, Newry
- St Louis Grammar School, Kilkeel
- St Michael's Grammar School, Lurgan
- Lurgan College
- Portadown College
- Regent House Grammar School
- Our Lady and St Patrick's College
- Assumption Grammar School
- Down High School
- St Patrick's Grammar, Downpatrick
- Friends' School
- Wallace High School
- Bangor Grammar School
- Glenola Collegiate School
- Sullivan Upper School
- Lagan College (bi-lateral school admitting 35% of intake using academic criteria)
- Aquinas Diocesan Grammar School
- Belfast Royal Academy
- Bloomfield Collegiate School
- Campbell College
- Dominican College, Belfast
- Grosvenor Grammar School
- Hunterhouse College
- Methodist College
- Rathmore Grammar School
- St Dominic's High School
- St Malachy's College
- St Mary's Christian Brothers
- Strathearn School
- Royal Belfast Academical Institution
- Victoria College
- Wellington College

Schools that have used Academic Admissions Criteria in some of the last five years

- Holy Cross College, Strabane (bi-lateral school admitting 35% of intake using academic selection up to 2009, now assesses children for entry to the grammar stream after admission)
- St Patrick's College Maghera (bi-lateral school admitted 35% of intake using academic selection up to 2009, now assesses children for entry to the grammar stream after admission)

- St McNissi's College (used academic selection up to 2010 when it merged with two other schools to become St Killian's College which does not use academic selection)

Líofa 2015

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 1686/11-15, given his intention 'to support Líofa 2015 in whatever ways might be possible through the education system', whether this support will include efforts to de-politicise the Irish language.

(AQW 2220/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My focus as Education Minister is to create an education service that ensures that all our schools, regardless of the sector from which they come, deliver high quality educational outcomes for all our young people and for the economy in general. The review of Irish-medium education did however also recognise the aspirations, articulated by representatives of that sector, for Irish-medium education to be accessed across all of society here. The review recommended that outreach to those not currently accessing Irish-medium education should be taken forward, through a staged approach reflecting shared linguistic heritage. I welcome any initiative which challenges and attempts to break down traditional misconceptions about Irish language and culture being the preserve of one section of our community.

Líofa 2015

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 1686/11-15, given his intention 'to support Líofa 2015 in whatever ways might be possible through the education system' whether he has carried out any analysis on the prevalence of the view of the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that some people have sought to portray the promotion of Gaelic culture and the Irish Language as the preserve of one section of our community.

(AQW 2221/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My focus as Education Minister is to create an education service that ensures that all our schools, regardless of the sector from which they come, deliver high quality educational outcomes for all our young people and for the economy in general. The review of Irish-medium education did however also recognise the aspirations, articulated by representatives of that sector, for Irish-medium education to be accessed across all of society here. The review recommended that outreach to those not currently accessing Irish-medium education should be taken forward, through a staged approach reflecting shared linguistic heritage. I welcome any initiative which challenges and attempts to break down traditional misconceptions about Irish language and culture being the preserve of one section of our community.

Schools: Free Transport

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education to detail how the Education and Library Boards determine whether pupils are eligible for free school transport, broken down by education sector.

(AQW 2228/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Library Boards determine whether a pupil is eligible for home to school transport assistance in line with the Department's transport policy Circular 1996/14 (as amended).

Eligibility is determined based on two criteria.

- (a) distance – a pupil is eligible if he/she lives more than 2 miles from a primary school or 3 miles from a post primary school and where the pupil has applied to and been refused admission from all suitable schools of the same educational sector within those distances.
- (b) suitable school – is defined as a grant aided school in any of the educational categories of integrated, maintained, controlled, Irish medium, denominational grammar and non-denominational grammar.

The eligibility criteria are the same for all educational sectors.

Once a pupil is eligible for transport assistance, Boards consider how best to provide that assistance based on the number of pupils and their location, whilst ensuring the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure. Most pupils travel using Translink bus passes as it has the widest network. Thereafter, Board buses are used, primarily in rural areas, followed by private operator buses, taxis, or the provision of a parental allowance.

Schools: Free Transport

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education how many children received free school transport in the (i) 2009/10; (ii) 2010/11; and (iii) 2011/12 academic years, broken down by (a) Education and Library Board; and (b) education sector.

(AQW 2229/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Library Boards have confirmed that the numbers of pupils who received free school transport in 2009/10 and 2010/11 are as set out in the tables below. The figures are not available yet for the 2011/12 academic year.

TRANSLINK, METRO OR NI RAILWAY SERVICES

Year 2010/11	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB
Controlled	81	2755	1701	1474	944
Maintained	60	3856	1317	2344	1493
Controlled Integrated	77	193	507	18	0
Grant Maintained Integrated	923	1214	881	673	473
Irish Medium	62	17	117	21	3
Controlled Grammar	14	2076	2346	1319	1362
Voluntary Grammar	273	5982	6019	5496	3729
Special	112	337	709	10	164
Alternative Education Provision	0	3	22	0	2
Total	1602	16433	13619	11355	8170

TRANSLINK, METRO OR NI RAILWAY SERVICES

Year 2009/10	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB
Controlled	78	2976	1781	1589	984
Maintained	63	3178	1380	2480	1548
Controlled Integrated	84	115	527	21	0
Grant Maintained Integrated	965	1191	950	657	482
Irish Medium	71	18	108	13	3
Controlled Grammar	17	2089	2355	1293	1374
Voluntary Grammar	282	6505	6001	5332	3667

Year 2009/10	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB
Special	71	326	642	0	134
Alternative Education Provision	1	2	17	0	6
Total	1632	16400	13761	11385	8198

EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD BUS, PRIVATE OPERATOR BUS OR TAXI HIRED BY THE BOARD

Year 2010/11	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB
Controlled	64	1022	835	3696	3419
Maintained	275	1197	605	5622	5255
Controlled Integrated	5	19	129	244	0
Grant Maintained Integrated	20	110	125	208	1244
Irish Medium	1	82	2	44	121
Controlled Grammar	4	4	16	20	451
Voluntary Grammar	12	33	198	1141	1549
Special	1189	1283	1964	1253	1284
Alternative Education Provision	0	57	35	68	26
Total	1570	3807	3909	12296	13349

EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD BUS, PRIVATE OPERATOR BUS OR TAXI HIRED BY THE BOARD

Year 2009/10	BELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	WELB
Controlled	46	1055	854	4097	3503
Maintained	259	1120	517	6049	5590
Controlled Integrated	3	34	106	242	0
Grant Maintained Integrated	20	110	97	204	1235
Irish Medium	1	71	2	33	138
Controlled Grammar	4	7	16	1	469
Voluntary Grammar	15	49	184	979	1548
Special	1228	1368	1968	1066	1253
Alternative Education Provision	5	74	27	103	34
Total	1581	3888	3771	12774	13770

Preparatory Schools: Funding

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Education for an update on the funding for preparatory schools, given that the closing date for the consultation was 18 months ago.

(AQW 2262/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Over 400 responses were received in respect of the EQIA consultation on the proposal to withdraw funding from the preparatory departments of grammar schools. Following the consultation, the then Minister for Education, Catriona Ruane, maintained the view that the funding of preparatory schools is an inequitable use of public funding. She did, however, take account of comments received as part of the EQIA consultation exercise and recognised that the ending of funding completely may have caused difficulties for parents and children and possible disruption to some schools. Hence her decision to continue funding preparatory departments, but to reduce the level of funding by one-third (ie, 20% of an Age Weighted Pupil Unit) with effect from September 2010.

The budget for this year has been decided and no changes were made to the level of funding provided to preparatory departments.

Schools: Transport

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education how many pupils who travel to school in a hired bus or a taxi provided by an Education and Library Board have been late or have not attended school as a result of adverse weather conditions, broken down by Education and Library Board area in the (i) 2009/2010; (ii) 2010/11; and (iii) 2011/12 academic year.

(AQW 2265/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Library Boards, the bodies responsible for transport, have advised me that the information is not recorded in the requested format.

Preschool Places

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Education how many pre-school places were available in each nursery school in the East Londonderry area in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2292/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There are 3 nursery schools in East Derry. The number of places available in the each of the schools remained the same in each of the last three years and was as follows:-

NAME OF SCHOOL PLACES AVAILABLE IN 2008-09, 2009-10 AND 2010 -11

Limavady Nursery	Kylemore Nursery	Ballysally Nursery
78	104	52

Protestant Teachers Employed in Catholic Maintained Schools

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education how many Protestant teachers are employed in Catholic maintained schools, broken down by (i) nursery school; (ii) primary school; and (iii) secondary school.

(AQW 2316/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 56/11-15, tabled by David McIlveen MLA and published in the Official Report on 27 May 2011.

Schools: 'Every School A Good School: The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Inclusion'

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education (i) to outline the main findings of the consultation document 'Every School A Good School: The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion'; (ii) whether his Department intends to implement any of the recommendations; and (iii) to outline the timeframe for the implementation of the recommendations.

(AQW 2327/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The consultation document, 'Every School a Good School: The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Inclusion' contained a broad range of proposals, which included: reduction in the bureaucracy of the current SEN framework; greater consistency in assessment and provision; improved collaborative working arrangements; and promotion of the professional development of school staff. The consultation exercise generated a high level of interest resulting in over 2900 responses. The Department has given full consideration to these responses and has taken care to fully understand and reflect the range of perspectives that the respondents provided. I have recently considered the draft summary report of the responses to the consultation.

I expect that this summary response report will issue later in the autumn, along with an indication of the broad direction of travel that I propose the policy will take. I envisage that any resultant legislative proposals would be drafted for consideration in early 2012.

In the meantime a capacity building programme for schools based on disseminating best practice is underway to enable schools to meet more effectively the needs of children with special educational needs within their current responsibilities, and will prepare the education workforce to implement any future policy changes which emerge from the review.

Schools: 'Every School A Good School: The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Inclusion'

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education (i) for his assessment of the potential impact that the review by the Public Health Agency on Allied Health Professional Services to children with special needs will have on the policy proposals contained in 'Every School a Good School: The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion'; and (ii) what is the likely timeframe for the implementation of any recommendations arising from the review.

(AQW 2329/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Proposals contained in the consultation document: 'Every School a Good School - The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion' identified partnership arrangements between the education sector and allied health professionals as being key to the successful delivery of support services for children with special educational needs (SEN). It is both relevant and encouraging that working in partnership runs through the draft Strategy for Allied Health Professions (AHP) issued by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS).

I welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation on this strategy. I also endorse the continued opportunity as recommended in the strategy, for the health, social care and education sectors to work collaboratively in the development and implementation of policies and practices to address the needs of SEN children.

The timescale for implementation of any recommendations arising from the AHP review will be a matter for DHSSPS in the first instance. In relation to the review of SEN and inclusion, I expect that a summary response report will issue later in the autumn, along with an indication of the broad direction of travel that I propose the policy will take.

Education: Children with Special Needs

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education what joint arrangements are in place between his Department and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to the on-going review and provision of services for children with special needs.

(AQW 2330/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Review of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Inclusion has established a steering group of key statutory partners to oversee progress on the review. That group also acts as project board for the recently approved pilots in SEN supports for early years' settings and in level A educational assessment. Since improvements in collaborative working across education and health and social care sectors is a key theme within the review, the steering group includes representation from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS).

The Department of Education and DHSSPS continue to work collaboratively on a range of policy issues which impact on provision for children with SEN including:-

- a cross-departmental autism strategy and an education strategic framework;
- the DHSSPS Speech, Language and Communication Plan (2011/12-2012/13) – the health and education sectors will be working collaboratively to take forward a number of actions;
- the Ministerial Sub Committee on Children and Young People which is considering the provision for children with SEN when they make the transition from school to post school placements or employment;
- protocols to improve services for children and young people with significant challenging behaviours through improved collaboration between education and health sectors which is being progressed under the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability.

In addition I met with Minister Poots on 4 July 2011 to discuss how both departments can further strengthen links to enhance the education and welfare needs of children across a number of areas including children with SEN.

Early Years (0-6) Strategy

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education what discussions his Department has had with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to the implementation of the Early Years (0-6) Strategy.

(AQW 2346/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Early Years Strategy has a specific focus on Department of Education interventions but includes other departments as appropriate.

The Department works closely with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that our policies on Early Years services bring together support for parents and children in a coherent and cost effective way. DHSSPS has been involved in and consulted throughout the development of the draft Strategy. In addition, it is represented on the Stakeholder Advisory Group that has been established to contribute to the way forward for the Strategy.

Departmental officials are currently considering the nearly 2,000 responses to the consultation on the draft Early Years (0-6) Strategy. In finalising the draft Strategy, officials will liaise with DHSSPS colleagues to ascertain how it can be implemented most effectively.

Teacher Education Review

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Education when the review of teacher education will commence.

(AQW 2381/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The review of teacher education was launched jointly by the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) in 2003.

Following a series of teacher education conferences and a consultation exercise which closed on 8 November 2010, my Department, in liaison with DEL, is currently in the process of developing a strategy/action plan for the way forward for teacher education, with a view to publishing it by Spring 2012.

Careers Guidance Teachers

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) his plans to implement training for careers guidance teachers; and (ii) for his assessment of whether they should have a specific careers guidance qualification.

(AQW 2387/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The joint DE DEL "Preparing for Success" careers strategy endorses the partnership model of careers guidance as the preferred model of provision for young people. The strategy makes clear that careers teachers and careers service advisors have distinct but complementary roles. Schools are responsible for providing effective careers education for which a specific careers guidance qualification is not required but should provide access to the qualified professional expertise and impartial advice and guidance available through the careers service.

My officials are currently exploring the extent to which continuing professional development opportunities currently exist and are available for careers teachers to enable them to build capacity in designing and delivering an effective careers information and guidance programme in schools

'Promoting Racial Equality in Northern Ireland's Post-Primary Schools'

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education what consideration he has given to the recommendations in the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities report on, 'Promoting Racial Equality in Northern Ireland's Post-Primary Schools'.

(AQW 2409/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I was pleased to help launch the report in June 2011 and at that time I gave NICEM an undertaking that I would formally respond to the report's recommendations.

In the interim, officials within my Department have liaised with colleagues in the Council for the Curriculum Examinations & Assessment and the Inclusion and Diversity Service.

I intend to provide the Executive Director of NICEM with my response in the near future. I will arrange for you to receive a copy.

Schools Milk Scheme

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the Schools Milk Scheme; and (ii) how many schools in the North Antrim area offer this scheme.

(AQW 2410/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Milk and dairy products are excellent sources of nutrients such as calcium, protein and vitamins and, for this reason, they are included in the Department of Education's Nutritional Standards for School Lunches and for Other Food and Drinks in Schools. Every lunch served in school must contain at least one portion of food from the milk and dairy foods group and, in addition, drinking milk must be available as an option every day.

The EU School Milk Subsidy Scheme, which is administered by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, provides a valuable way for children to obtain these nutrients at a very reasonable cost and I would encourage all parents to take advantage of it.

I have been advised that 55 grant-aided schools in the North Antrim area offer the EU Scheme. This represents around two thirds of all the schools in the constituency.

Council for Catholic Maintained Schools

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Education to detail the (i) annual salary cost; and (ii) number of staff at the Council of Catholic Maintained Schools in (a) 2009/10; (b) 2010/11; (c) 2011/12; and (d) projected for 2012/13 through to 2014/15.

(AQW 2414/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The annual salary costs and number of staff in post at CCMS for 2009/10 and 2010/11 is detailed in the table below. CCMS are not in a position to provide similar information for 2011/12, 2012/13 to 2014/15, as it is currently going through a phase of substantial staff restructuring and it is not possible to provide projected figures at this time.

	No of Staff	Annual Salary Cost £000s
09/10	88*	2,947
10/11	85#	3,218

* includes 2 agency staff

includes 1 agency staff

Líofa 2015

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 1686/11-15, to detail the expenditure incurred by his Department in supporting the Líofa 2015 project.

(AQW 2450/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department has incurred no expenditure in direct support of the Liofa project.

Department for Employment and Learning

Veterinary Students

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans are in place to allow veterinary degree students to study and train in Northern Ireland rather than having to travel to Great Britain; and what veterinary courses are currently available.

(AQW 1942/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): My Department has no plans to develop a veterinary degree course in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland's Higher Education Institutions are responsible for their own policies and procedures, including course provision.

However, my Department will continue to provide financial support for eligible students from Northern Ireland who commence all undergraduate degree courses (including veterinary science) in Great Britain in academic year 2012/13.

You may wish to note that the availability, and other trends, within the veterinary profession are regularly surveyed by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS). The most recent survey does not indicate any impending shortfall in the number of veterinary surgeons, nor has the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development identified any such difficulties within Northern Ireland. Furthermore, research undertaken by my Department in 2009, on forecasting future skills need in Northern Ireland, shows that the supply of veterinary science graduates is projected to meet the indicative graduate requirement up to 2020.

A veterinary public health post-graduate course is available at the University of Ulster in conjunction with University College Dublin and the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) provides part time courses in veterinary nursing. Veterinary science degree courses are available at seven universities across Great Britain and at University College Dublin.

Educational Attainment: Kilcooley Estate, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has that should result in an increase in educational attainment for the residents of the Kilcooley Estate, Bangor.

(AQW 1973/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department is committed to widening access to educational opportunities for individuals across Northern Ireland.

As the main providers of adult education throughout Northern Ireland, Further Education (FE) Colleges continue to encourage access to FE by delivering a wide and varied curriculum through their main campuses and network of community outreach centres. The Bangor campus of the South Eastern Regional College offers a range of full-time and part-time courses across the 15 sector subject classifications. These qualifications range from Entry level to level 5, and are available to people of all abilities. The subjects cover Health and Care, Business and Management, Computing, Construction, Hairdressing and Beauty, and Hospitality, as well as a range of non-accredited hobby and leisure type provision. More detail on the actual courses on offer is available from the College's prospectus and website.

In addition, my Department has developed and implemented the Learner Access and Engagement Programme (LAE). This programme, which is currently being piloted, allows FE Colleges to contract with third party organisations for the provision of learner support. This support is directed at those 'hard to reach' adults who are economically inactive, disengaged from the labour market, with few or no qualifications, to encourage them to enrol on, and to complete, FE courses. In the 2009/10 academic year, the Further Education Statistical Record (FESR) indicated that 442 learners had been enrolled by the South Eastern Regional College on the LAE programme.

My Department is also committed to widening participation in higher education by students from those groups who are currently under-represented, in particular, students from disadvantaged backgrounds and students with learning difficulties and disabilities. In order to achieve this goal we clearly need to reach out to groups which have not traditionally benefitted from higher education. The Department is leading on the development of a new integrated Regional Strategy for Widening Participation in Higher Education. The vision is that people who are most able but least likely to participate should be given every encouragement and support to achieve the necessary qualifications to apply to, and to benefit from, the higher education provision that is right for them. The widening participation strategy will be published as part of the Higher Education Strategy later in the year.

The Department, and the further and higher educational institutions, place a high priority on the quality of provision delivered, leading to higher rates of retention and achievement. Those residents of the Kilcooley Estate who participate in further or higher education provision will benefit from this focus on quality and performance.

The Department's training programmes, ApprenticeshipsNI and Training for Success, are also available across Northern Ireland. Training for Success provides a guaranteed training opportunity for all eligible unemployed young people aged 16 and 17, in an occupational area of their choice and following appropriate qualifications at Levels 1 and/or 2. There is also extended eligibility for those with a disability and from an in-care background. The ApprenticeshipsNI programme is a work-based employed provision at Level2/Level3 and is open to all people who have reached the minimum school leaving age, and who meet the entry requirements set out by the sector.

These programmes are delivered, on behalf of the Department, by contracted training providers. Two providers are located in North Down, namely Rutledge Recruitment and Training (Bangor), and Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland. In addition, a number of other training providers are contracted to operate in North Down, namely Belfast Central Training Limited, Belfast College of Training & Education Ltd,

DFFP Ltd (People 1st), Hair Academy/Jennymount, North Down Training, Seven Towers Training, First4Skills, and the South Eastern Regional College.

Quality and achievement are also priorities in the delivery of training and apprenticeship programmes.

In relation to Essential Skills, needs (and any other barriers to employment) are identified at the earliest possible opportunity by Employment Advisers in Bangor JobCentre. Such clients are encouraged and supported to avail of the support available to help address their needs and barriers . This information is then relayed to the Lead Contractor (SERC) for them to take forward as prescribed in the StW guidelines. SERC has fully complied with their contractual obligations in relation to Essential Skills and the position is reported on at the monthly Lead Contractor meetings.

Essential Skills is an integral part of the StW programme and all clients in North Down, irrespective of their postcode, get the opportunity to avail of this once a need has been identified.

Special Adviser

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether his Special Adviser is paid within Band A or Band B of the Department of Finance and Personnel's salary scale; and, if it is within Band B whether, in light of the DFP decision to increase the upper limit of the Band B scale to £90,000, there has been an increase in salary or an increase is planned.

(AQW 1977/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Special Adviser is paid on Pay Band B. There has been no increase in salary and no increase is planned in the context of the DFP decision to increase the upper limit of the Band B scale to £90,000.

AccessNI

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the total number of students at (i) Stranmillis University College; and (ii) St Mary's University College who have been subject to an AccessNI check in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1996/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department does not hold this information, however, the two university colleges have provided the requested figures attached at Annex A.

ANNEX A

STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE ACCESS NI CHECKS

Year	Number of Checks
2010/11	711
2009/10	696
2008/9	591
Total	1998

ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY COLLEGE ACCESS NI CHECKS

Year	Number of Checks
2010/11	273
2009/10	278
2008/9	453

Year	Number of Checks
Total	1004

As Access NI checks were introduced in April 2008, the tables detail the number of checks in each academic year since that date. Total figures for the current academic year are not yet available.

Kilcooley Women's Education Centre, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to visit the Kilcooley Women's Education Centre in Bangor.

(AQW 2047/11-15)

Dr Farry: I would hope to be in a position to accept an invitation in the future, subject to diary pressures. My predecessor visited the Centre on 3 March 2011 and I am aware of the ongoing situation regarding funding, due to an unsuccessful bid by a third party under the European Social Fund.

Students Leaving Northern Ireland

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to address the large number of student leaving Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2048/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department has no plans to discourage students from opting for universities elsewhere as their first choice rather than universities in Northern Ireland. Students should continue to have a free choice of academic institute within the United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland and elsewhere.

Moreover, research has indicated that, in the main, those who opt for a university place in Great Britain as their first choice do so because they believe that that institution is the best place to study their chosen subject and gives them the development opportunity to live and study away from home. In that respect, these students are 'determined leavers'.

However, you should note that, as part of the package agreed with the Executive in relation to tuition fees for local students in Northern Ireland, limited funding will be made available to allow for a modest increase in the number of student places across our higher education providers.

Given the potential for alterations in student flows as the result of differential tuition fee levels across the United Kingdom, the Department will be monitoring the overall situation.

Young People not in Education, Employment or Training

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of young people not in education, employment or training in each constituency.

(AQW 2062/11-15)

Dr Farry: Estimates of those young people not in employment, full time education or training (NEET) are derived from a sample survey (LFS) survey and are available at NI level. It is not possible to disaggregate these to constituency level. The most recent (Quarter 2 2011) LFS data on the numbers of young people aged 16 to 24 estimate that there are 41,000 young people who were not in employment, participating in government training schemes or in full time education in Northern Ireland. It is not possible to identify separately those in part-time education or non-government sponsored training.

Creative Blueprint Document

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how the objectives outlined in the Creative Blueprint Document produced by Creative and Cultural Skills in 2008 are being met.

(AQW 2081/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Creative Blueprint Document is the Sector Skills Agreement, produced by, and for, employers in the creative and cultural sector, to identify their skills needs and set out an action plan for addressing these needs. The Blueprint Document has 10 key objectives, which Creative and Cultural Skills is working to meet and progress against these objectives is outlined below.

- 1 **Creative Apprenticeships** – A pilot Creative Apprenticeship Scheme was set up in April 2011. This pilot is delivered in partnership with Belfast Metropolitan College and is funded by the Department for Employment and Learning. There are currently 5 Apprentices undertaking the Technical Theatre pathway.
- 2 **Creative & Cultural Leadership Programme** - A successful leadership programme was delivered in 2009/10. It was hoped to deliver it again in 2010/11, however, the timing of a second programme so soon after the first was deemed inopportune. Leadership is still a priority issue, however and Creative and Cultural Skills are currently working with Arts & Business to support their existing provision and explore new ways of enabling development in this area.
- 3 **Northern Ireland Careers Strategy** - This was developed to shape the content of the 'Creative Choices' website, which was set up to offer dedicated careers information, advice and guidance. In 2010, the Department of Employment and Learning funded Creative and Cultural Skills to develop specific Northern Ireland content. This content is now online.
- 4 **Continuing Professional Development (CPD)** - In collaboration with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Creative and Cultural Skills conducted research into the CPD needs of the Arts sector in Northern Ireland. This research has informed subsequent activity and resulted in the production of a document entitled 'Thriving or Surviving' to increase CPD engagement across the sector. This document was produced in collaboration with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Arts & Business and Audiences NI to provide a coherent voice on the importance of CPD. Creative and Cultural Skills delivered a 'Professional Development Through Mentoring' programme, focusing on 3 of the core themes identified in 'Thriving or Surviving', that is, marketing, audience development and fundraising. This programme was successful and delivered specific outcomes for each of the 13 organisations involved.
- 5 **UK Design Skills Alliance in Northern Ireland** - The Northern Ireland Design Alliance was established in November 2009 with the aim of building a design community which drives professional standards in Northern Ireland and provides a voice for the Design industry within Education and Government.

Creative and Cultural Skills have facilitated a number of well attended CPD events involving renowned design speakers. They have also facilitated smaller events with local designers either speaking about their own practice, or facilitating discussion, for example, the Design By Committee Day. In addition, they organised a design competition with the University of Ulster in January 2011.

Interest in the Northern Ireland Design Alliance has grown steadily and it now has over 500 subscribers to the website (www.nidesignalliance.com). The Design sector in Northern Ireland has increased in size significantly and now comprises over half the Creative and Cultural Skills footprint in terms of employment.

- 6 **National Skills Academy (NSA)** - Research was conducted in 2009/10 regarding the sector's awareness of the NSA model and how it might be received in Northern Ireland. The recommendation was to wait until the NSA model in England had been up and running for longer and then to revisit the potential for Northern Ireland. This concept has received support from both the education and industry sectors. Developing an NSA model is seen as pivotal to the future work of Creative and Cultural Skills in Northern Ireland.

7. **Qualification Reform** - Creative & Cultural Skills work alongside both Higher Education and Further Education, sharing research and facilitating links with industry, for example, Creative Apprenticeships and the design competition with the University of Ulster.

All education bodies in Northern Ireland were invited to contribute to the recent Sector Qualifications Strategy published in July 2011. Creative & Cultural Skills have been actively involved in the migration qualifications from the National Qualifications Framework to the Qualifications and Credit Framework. They have also been involved in developing new National Occupational Standards for their sector, where there has been industry demand, for example, working with Craft NI to develop National Occupational Standards for the Craft sector.

8. **Business Skills and Enterprise** - This is part of ongoing discussions with Education. In April 2010, Creative & Cultural Skills held an event with Further Education and the industry to share ideas and projects which education can incorporate into their teaching programmes to help address the issue of business awareness.

Creative & Cultural Skills has also developed a bespoke website called 'Business Survival toolkit': www.business-survival-toolkit.co.uk. This offers practical step-by-step advice to anyone seeking to start up a creative business, or grow it further.

9. **Creativity and Culture in Schools** – Creative and Cultural Skills currently work with the Department of Education and CCEA on the school curriculum.
10. **Diversity** - A commitment to diversity and equality is embedded across all programmes. Creative and Cultural Skills plan to specifically address diversity in the workplace, through a wider roll-out of their Creative Apprenticeship, when the pilot programme has been completed.

University Places

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how his Department will seek to address the pressure on students with median grades who are applying for university places, given that there has been only a small increase in the number of university places in this Comprehensive Spending Review period.

(AQW 2166/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department anticipates that increased fees in the rest of the United Kingdom will result in greater demand from Northern Ireland students to have the opportunity to study at home and we need to be responsive to this demand. While the decisions on meeting the overall budget shortfall mean that I have very limited funding available to allow me to increase the number of student places in Northern Ireland, part of the package agreed with the Executive will allow for a modest increase in supply across higher education providers. My officials will work with higher education providers on this issue.

My Department is also committed to widening participation in higher education by students from those groups which are currently under-represented, in particular, students from disadvantaged backgrounds and students with learning difficulties and disabilities. The Department is leading on the development of a new integrated Regional Strategy for Widening Participation in Higher Education, which will be published as part of the Higher Education Strategy later in the year.

However, it should be recognised that applying for University is a competitive process and Northern Ireland's Higher Education Institutions should continue to be able to select the highest achieving applicants for the most desirable courses. Any increase in the calibre of Northern Ireland students opting to study at home will only serve to strengthen our already first-rate Higher Education Sector.

Those students who fail to obtain an offer of a place on a higher education course can avail of the advice provided by my Department's professionally qualified Careers Advisers to discuss other modes of learning or employment opportunities. Careers Advisers are based in JobCentres, Jobs and Benefits Offices and Careers Offices throughout Northern Ireland.

Steps to Work and Steps Ahead Programmes

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the number of people from West Belfast who have taken part in the programmes (a) Steps to Work; and (b) Steps Ahead; (ii) the placements arranged for programme clients; (iii) the number of clients who retained jobs after their placements finished; (iv) the amount of money an employer receives for each placement hosted; and (v) the amount of money received by the programme client while on a placement.

(AQW 2173/11-15)

Dr Farry: From the introduction of Steps to Work in September 2008 until June 2011, 8,585 participants from the West Belfast contract area have participated on the Steps to Work programme.

All participants receive an initial period of advice and guidance from an Employment Service Adviser (Step 1 of the programme) at their Jobs and Benefits office with the aim of assisting them find work. Those who do not find work move to the next stage of the programme (Step 2) where they have access to work experience, training, subsidised employment, self - employment and Step Ahead jobs.

- (i)(a) Out of the 8,585 participants above, 5,025 took part in Step 2 provision.
- (i)(b) Of the 5,025 who commenced Step 2 provision in the period September 2008 to June 2011, 339 availed of Step Ahead employment.
- (ii) Work experience placements for StW Step 2 participants are arranged in line with participants' job goals and can range from placements in the retail sector to those in information technology.
- (iii) The Department records the number of participants who find work following their participation on StW regardless of whether or not it is with the work experience placement provider. In the period September 2008 until December 2010 (the latest date for which these statistics are available), of the 2,567 people from West Belfast who left Step 2 provision 522 moved into subsidised/ unsubsidised employment.
- (iv) The Department does not make payments to employers who offer work experience placements.
- (v) Participants on Step 2 provision in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) receive a Benefit Based Training Allowance equivalent to their former rate of JSA plus a top-up of £15.38 per week. Other participants receive a Training Bonus of £15.38 per week in addition to any other benefits currently in payment. In addition reimbursement of travel expenses in excess of £4 per week is payable to those on work experience placement and assistance towards the cost of childcare, depending on individual circumstances, for those who are eligible.

Steps to Work and Steps Ahead Programmes

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what training is undertaken by advisers for the programmes (a) Steps to Work; and (b) Steps Ahead.

(AQW 2174/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Steps to Work programmes were first introduced on a pilot basis in 2007 and rolled out across Northern Ireland in 2008. From that time Advisers in the Employment Service have received training in all aspects of the programme. The classroom based training is 4 days in duration and at the end of the course the Advisers will have an understanding of the objectives of the programme, the eligibility criteria for clients, how to explain to clients the various options which are available to them and the support that they can avail of. This training is then further consolidated in the live office environment. When the Step Ahead element was introduced to the Steps to Work Programme in 2009, this was also incorporated into the Steps to Work Training programme.

Between April 2007 and June 2011 just under 850 Employment Service staff have participated in Steps to Work Training.

Steps to Work and Steps Ahead Programmes

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when the (i) Steps to Work; and (ii) Steps Ahead programmes will be reviewed.

(AQW 2176/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Department keeps all aspects of Steps to Work, including Step Ahead, under continuous review. In addition a formal independent evaluation of the Steps to Work programme is currently underway. Step Ahead, which is one of the strands within the Steps to Work programme, will be included within the evaluation. The evaluation of Steps to Work is expected to be completed by the end of 2011.

DEL Sponsored Training Schemes

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to make the tendering process for his Department's sponsored training schemes more competitive; and what he would define as an appropriate rate for lead contractors to charge those delivering the services, given that some are currently charging as much as 20 percent.

(AQW 2233/11-15)

Dr Farry: Public procurement processes and methodology are guided by legislation and are designed to be open, fair, transparent and fully competitive in order to deliver value for money for the public purse. Under the partnership with the Department of Finance and Personnel's Central Procurement Directorate, I am content that procurement exercises undertaken by my Department meet these parameters.

Contracted main suppliers of training programmes are reimbursed at predetermined rates based on delivery outcomes. My Department does not define a separate rate for the delivery of sub-contracted services. This is a matter for negotiation between the respective parties who enter into arrangements on a commercial basis.

DEL: Land Deemed Surplus to Requirements

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what land in the North Down area his Department has deemed surplus to requirements.

(AQW 2244/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Department for Employment and Learning does not own any land in the North Down area.

St Mary's University College, Belfast

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many Protestant staff are currently employed at St Mary's University College, Belfast.

(AQW 2281/11-15)

Dr Farry: St Mary's University College has advised me that, as of 22 September 2011, the College employs 12 staff with a Protestant background which represents 7% of the workforce.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Lignite Prospecting Licences: Moratorium

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the extension of the moratorium on lignite prospecting licences in North Antrim.

(AQW 1747/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I expect to be in a position to announce an extension of the moratorium on the issue of Mineral Prospecting Licences shortly. This extension, which will run until 25th October 2013, will be accompanied by a lignite policy statement.

Following discussions between DETI and Planning Service officials the lignite policy has been revised to ease the planning restrictions over the Ballymoney lignite resource area, initially for a period of two years. Planning applications will be monitored during this period to ensure that a balance is achieved between permitting development and the protection of this strategic energy resource, in accordance with the Strategic Energy Framework 2010.

DETI: Procurement

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 1118/11-15, why her Department would incur disproportionate cost in answering when all other Departments have been able to produce this information.

(AQW 1758/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The information sought for the period May 2007 to March 2010 would require a departmental wide request across 26 business areas. This would involve disproportionate cost

Invest NI

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) how many new jobs have been created by Invest NI in each constituency in each of the last five years; (ii) of those how many still exist; and (iii) how many potential foreign investors visited each constituency over the same period and what were the outcomes from the visits.

(AQW 1803/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Table 1 shows (i) the number of jobs expected to be created, which are described as 'Jobs Promoted', by investors that had an offer of assistance approved by Invest NI between 1 April 2006 and 31 March 2011, broken down by Parliamentary Constituency Area (PCA). This represents the number of jobs that investors plan to create over the lifetime of assisted projects.

The geographic location of projects is determined by those businesses which bring forward projects suitable for Invest NI assistance and are based on their specific requirements. It is also not possible to align visits with specific investment. A company may visit any number of times before investing, or indeed choose not to invest.

TABLE 1: INVEST NI JOBS PROMOTED BY PCA (2006-07 TO 2010-11)

PCA	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	Total
Belfast East	678	304	1,089	396	925	3,392
Belfast North	91	51	117	472	66	797
Belfast South	966	527	358	642	703	3,196
Belfast West	58	178	92	46	5	379
East Antrim	69	284	42	53	222	670
East Londonderry	56	389	58	73	63	639
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	722	250	397	149	198	1,716
Foyle	875	994	217	265	365	2,716

PCA	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	Total
Lagan Valley	143	107	102	186	251	789
Mid Ulster	270	398	356	228	177	1,429
Newry and Armagh	424	427	928	135	613	2,527
North Antrim	246	95	191	42	106	680
North Down	255	60	91	172	25	603
South Antrim	48	65	212	134	715	1,174
South Down	93	61	569	148	115	986
Strangford	86	61	134	137	33	451
Upper Bann	147	102	269	713	116	1,347
West Tyrone	116	199	71	106	70	561
Not yet located	-	-	-	20	545	565
Total	5,343	4,552	5,293	4,113	5,312	24,612

Note: Invest NI revises performance data on a regular basis to ensure that it reflects implemented projects; therefore, the data above may differ to previously published information.

In addition, Invest NI supported over 8,500 new jobs indirectly through its Enterprise Development Programme (EDP) – formerly the Start A Business Programme. Table 2 shows the breakdown of these jobs across PCAs.

TABLE 2: INVEST NI ESTIMATED NUMBER OF JOBS INDIRECTLY SUPPORTED THROUGH THE ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (EDP) BY PCA (2006-07 TO 2010-11)

PCA	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	Total
Belfast East	59	84	68	58	92	362
Belfast North	58	77	63	78	108	383
Belfast South	81	86	73	76	120	436
Belfast West	81	85	61	62	78	368
East Antrim	104	97	65	56	68	389
East Londonderry	120	149	99	87	139	595
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	184	202	143	124	148	800
Foyle	125	164	97	74	84	545
Lagan Valley	81	78	53	58	94	364
Mid Ulster	141	166	105	124	181	718
Newry and Armagh	112	136	86	81	116	532
North Antrim	122	142	81	52	81	477

PCA	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	Total
North Down	69	56	50	34	69	278
South Antrim	80	76	57	53	88	355
South Down	102	132	79	79	105	497
Strangford	80	72	47	42	76	317
Upper Bann	85	108	93	67	101	454
West Tyrone	121	148	109	111	134	623
Total	1,806	2,058	1,431	1,318	1,881	8,494

Notes:

1. 10 jobs could not be allocated at PCA level.
2. These figures are based on an estimate of jobs created by an individual EDP offer. This estimation process is derived from an independent evaluation of the programme.

Individual projects supported, and the associated job creation, may take up to 5 years to be fully implemented. Whilst individual projects are monitored on an ongoing basis, information on the number of jobs in existence at a particular point in time is not centrally collated and the costs in doing so would be disproportionate.

Table 3 below shows the number of visits by potential foreign investors to each PCA during the period under review.

TABLE 3: NUMBER OF VISITS BY POTENTIAL FOREIGN INVESTORS BY PCA (2006-07 TO 2010-11)

PCA	2006-07	2007-08	*2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Belfast East	42	36	85	34	47
Belfast North	18	9	13	17	22
Belfast South	46	51	96	48	54
Belfast West	15	6	13	12	7
East Antrim	14	6	4	9	19
East Londonderry	0	3	2	5	2
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	0	0	0	0	0**
Foyle	15	4	7	13	10
Lagan Valley	0	1	45	3	7
Mid Ulster	4	0	4	0	0
Newry & Armagh	5	3	3	1	6
North Antrim	0	0	0	0	2
North Down	1	0	44	5	2
South Antrim	5	5	17	4	2
South Down	2	0	1	1	0

PCA	2006-07	2007-08	*2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Strangford	0	0	1	2	1
Upper Bann	6	4	7	0	0
West Tyrone	5	1	2	0	0
Total	178	129	344	154	181

* Visit figures for 2008-09 include visits associated with the USNI Investment Conference.

** It should be noted that Invest NI assisted the administrators in their management of the sale of Quinn Insurance. The sales process included multiple visits to Fermanagh and South Tyrone PCA in 2010-11 by international companies who were considering submitting a bid. These visits are not represented in the above figures.

Securing an inward investment may span a considerable period (18 to 24 months) and is the result of many factors which may, or may not, include visits to different locations. There is often a further time lag between securing an investment and jobs ultimately being created. It should be noted that the number of jobs promoted in Table 1 includes all jobs promoted by Invest NI. This includes both new and repeat indigenous investors, new inward investors and reinvestments by existing inward investors.

It is therefore not possible to directly link the number of visits in Table 3 to the number of jobs in Table 1.

Project Kelvin

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the uptake in the Coleraine Borough Council area of the opportunities presented by Project Kelvin.

(AQW 1828/11-15)

Mrs Foster: DETI does not hold details of the uptake by businesses in the Coleraine Borough Council area of the services offered by Project Kelvin, as these are commercial transactions between Hibernia Atlantic and their customers.

Invest NI's role is to promote Northern Ireland as an attractive and viable location for new inward investment opportunities. Its regional office network works closely with local stakeholders to encourage the development of regional propositions which can help ensure that the offering for their area is maximised to attract visits by potential investors. In doing so, Invest NI uses the benefits that Northern Ireland's telecoms infrastructure, and the new direct international link that Kelvin delivers, to position Northern Ireland as a location capable of providing solutions to the business needs of both new and existing investors.

The benefits of Northern Ireland's telecoms infrastructure are also promoted in overseas markets via a number of channels, including Invest NI's corporate website, sector brochures and during visits by potential investors. However, it is important to note that, whilst the telecommunications infrastructure is important to many potential investors, it remains only one area of consideration when choosing a location.

During the 2010/11 financial year, Invest NI clients initiated projects which will lead to the investment of £6m being undertaken within the area, which illustrates the attractiveness of the Coleraine Borough Council area proposition.

Project Kelvin

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how her Department has promoted Project Kelvin.

(AQW 1829/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI has completed extensive research on the benefits that Project Kelvin has brought to our already robust digital infrastructure and has identified and developed key sales messages to incorporate into the region's proposition. The sales messages on Project Kelvin focus on resilience, security, speed and cost.

These benefits are promoted to potential investors in overseas markets via a number of channels including the corporate website, sector brochures, presentations to potential investors, during journalist visits to Northern Ireland and during inward visits by potential investors.

Invest NI liaises with Hibernia Atlantic, the company responsible for building and operating Project Kelvin, and its partners to identify up-to-date and relevant messages that can be incorporated into its sales messages and to identify reference companies for its target sectors. It also liaises with representatives from Digital NI 2020, telecoms providers, economic development staff in local councils and Matrix, the Northern Ireland Science Industry Panel.

Invest NI has also been working to identify new opportunities for inward investment from companies in sectors that would specifically benefit from the advantages that Project Kelvin provides. For example, in financial services, Invest NI promotes the latency angle to companies that rely on the high speed transfer of data. Another area is film and TV post production, where Invest NI is seeking to build on its recent success in attracting major companies, including HBO, Universal and Playtone Studios.

Invest NI will continue to work with Hibernia and other stakeholders to build the benefits of Project Kelvin into its sales messages and identify new opportunities to sell the region as an inward investment location.

ESB Independent Energy

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she is satisfied that ESB Independent Energy and its satellites are not passing on inefficiency costs to customers in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1863/11-15)

Mrs Foster: ESB Independent Energy, along with ESB Customer Supply, were the electricity supply businesses within the Irish semi-state owned Electricity Supply Board, and have been merged and rebranded as Electric Ireland. The company offers electricity supply to some business customers in Northern Ireland and has recently expressed an interest in supplying the domestic market here.

All participants in the energy market in Northern Ireland, including the ESB owned NIE networks business, the ESBI owned Coolkeeragh power station, and Electric Ireland, are subject to various degrees of regulatory oversight by the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, however Electric Ireland's final consumer tariffs will not be specifically controlled by the Utility Regulator as they will be operating as a competitor in the business and domestic electricity markets.

The entry of new suppliers to the electricity market will offer households and small businesses greater choice and competitive pricing.

Energy: New Power Station

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of whether a new efficient and flexible power station in Northern Ireland would create employment and better serve local interests rather than the erection of a second north-south electricity interconnector.

(AQW 1904/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Investment in new electricity power generation is a commercial decision that depends on a company's ability to trade competitively within the cross border wholesale electricity market.

A new power station could create employment but whether it would better serve local interests depends on a plant being able to produce its power more cheaply than competitors. It must also be able to move its power through a reliable electricity grid infrastructure with adequate interconnection capacity with Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. Competition will be greatly improved by the construction of a second North-South interconnector.

Energy: Electricity Market

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she is content that although the regulator in Great Britain, Ofgem, is investigating its electricity market, the regulator in Northern Ireland is taking no such action despite electricity costs here being significantly higher.

(AQW 1905/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The electricity supply markets in Northern Ireland and Great Britain are significantly different, with the domestic and small business supply market in Great Britain having more suppliers and having been open to competition for much longer.

However, the historic dominance of Power NI (formerly NIE Energy) within the domestic and small business electricity supply market in Northern Ireland means the Utility Regulator retains a role in the rigorous scrutiny of Power NI's electricity tariffs, with the Regulator only permitting efficiently incurred costs to be passed on to customers along with tight control of permitted profits levels.

The Regulator monitors the operation of Northern Ireland's energy markets closely and will act to protect consumer interests, as it did in 2010 when it conducted an investigation into business electricity tariffs.

Energy: Mutual Energy

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) for her assessment of the role and value of Mutual Energy as a contributor to the development of an accountable energy strategy; (ii) to outline any accountability mechanisms that are in place which give control to her Department; and (iii) why the functions of Mutual Energy could not be performed by her Department.

(AQW 1907/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

- i. Mutual Energy Ltd plays a key role within the Northern Ireland energy industry through its ownership and operation of the Moyle electricity interconnector, the Scotland to Northern Ireland gas pipeline, and the Belfast gas transmission pipeline which was acquired from Phoenix Natural Gas.
- ii. Within the group of companies which make up Mutual Energy Ltd, Premier Transmission Ltd and Belfast Gas Transmission Ltd operate in line with the conditions of a gas conveyance licence granted by the Utility Regulator under the Gas (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, and Moyle Interconnector Ltd operates in line with the conditions of an electricity licence granted under the Electricity (Northern Ireland) Order 1992. Full details on the operating conditions placed on these licences are available on the Utility Regulator's website at www.uregni.gov.uk.
- iii. Following privatisation of the energy infrastructure in Northern Ireland in the early 1990's, government policy has moved away from State ownership and involvement in the day to day operation of energy assets.

Local Businesses

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what funding is available from her Department for local businesses seeking to expand their operations.

(AQW 1982/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department, through Invest NI, offers a wide range of financial assistance, as well as non-financial support, to established local businesses which are at the growth stage and which can

demonstrate that their plans will contribute to increasing Northern Ireland's productivity. Support can cover key areas such as skills, research and development, strategy and capital development, with the financial assistance package tailored to the needs of each individual company.

For local businesses seeking to expand into external markets, Invest NI can help companies develop a sound business and marketing strategy and the financial assistance available in this area can facilitate preliminary project scoping, the preparation of an appropriate business plan and assistance to employ a non-executive director to oversee the direction and management of the business.

Financial support is also available to help businesses improve the skills of both managers and employees with the aim of boosting productivity and increasing profits.

Invest NI may also be able to offer funding towards strategically important or critical activities aimed at helping a business secure its position and grow. This can include support to help companies overcome short-term barriers that have arisen due to difficult economic conditions, help with strategic projects that are focused on exploiting new markets or products, assistance with medium to long term projects aimed at increasing turnover and employment.

In order to help companies develop and maintain a competitive edge, extensive financial and advisory support is available to help companies undertake new research and development projects. This is backed up with a wide range of advisory services including workshops related to research and development and one to one advice on planning an R&D project.

A comprehensive guide to Invest NI's financial and advisory support is available from the agency's website at www.investni.com. In addition, Invest NI's nibusinessinfo.co.uk website offers easy to use, comprehensive and up to date practical advice and guidance on all aspects of starting, running and growing a business with access to over 70 business support tools, best practice case studies and access to funding options as well as wider support.

Westminster Government's Proposed Enterprise Zones

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the Westminster Government's proposed Enterprise Zones.

(AQW 1983/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I am aware of developments in Great Britain in relation to Enterprise Zones and my officials continue to assess the implications for Northern Ireland as they are implemented.

I continue to believe that Northern Ireland as a whole should be treated as an Enterprise Zone, through the devolution of corporation tax varying powers, as well as other fiscal incentives being offered to businesses in enterprise zones in Great Britain. Her Majesty's Treasury consultation on Rebalancing the Northern Ireland Economy seeks to create a larger, more sustainable private sector in Northern Ireland, and we await the Government's response to that consultation later this year.

DETI: Arm's-length Bodies

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the cost to her Department of its arm's-length bodies in each of the last two years.

(AQW 1990/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The cost to DETI of its arms length bodies (NDPBs) in each of the last two years is detailed in the table below;

BODY	2009/10/£M	2010/11/£M
Invest NI	170.2	147.6
NITB	41.1	39.6

BODY	2009/10/£M	2010/11/£M
HSENI	6.0	6.1
Consumer Council NI	1.6	1.4
Total	218.9	194.7

Tourist Board: Events Funding Programme for 2012

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given that the Tourist Board has indicated a preference for funding events which focus on the Titanic, Harland and Wolff and Derry's Walls, how the newly launched Events Funding Programme for 2012 will help those areas outside Belfast and Derry to host large events; and what steps her Department is taking to ensure that the funding will be fairly distributed.

(AQW 2015/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) Tourism Events Fund 2012-2013 launched on the 6th September 2011 and will close on the 7th October 2011 at 12:00 noon.

NITB will provide financial support for events that cover a broad range of our cultural, arts and sporting offerings which bring the Northern Ireland tourism brand to life. They will reflect the friendliness of our people, the vibrancy of our cities, the beauty of our landscapes and commonality of our rich heritage.

NITB held a number of road shows in Belfast, Enniskillen, Coleraine and Londonderry during the week of the launch of the NITB Tourism Events Fund 2012/13 to discuss the application process and the 2012/13 themes. The feedback from the road shows was positive and everyone wished to be involved in the 2012/13 celebrations 'Our Time, Our Place'.

NITB is encouraging the events industry to link with the 2012/13 themes; however it is not a mandatory criteria and does not disqualify an applicant from applying to the NITB Tourism Events Fund.

Renewable Energy

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of how an increase in renewable energy production will affect the volatility and high level of electricity prices for consumers.
(AQW 2069/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Strategic Energy Framework, adopted by the Executive in September 2010, estimated that the combined cost of renewable electricity installations, together with the cost of the grid investment necessary to meet the 40% target by 2020, could be between £49 and £83 per household on an annual basis at current prices.

Northern Ireland's current energy mix is very reliant on gas, oil and coal thereby making Northern Ireland very exposed to wholesale price rises of these fuels. Increasing the amount of renewables in our energy mix offers not only long term benefits in terms of security of supply but also the opportunity to insulate us to some extent against future wholesale energy price increases.

The costs of increasing renewable electricity production must therefore be considered in the context of the wider benefits, and indeed the cost of not integrating renewables.

Social Tariffs

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline her position on the introduction of social tariffs and any proposals her Department is considering.

(AQW 2070/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The introduction of a social tariff would be extremely complex and unlikely to solve the hardships caused by fuel poverty.

Tourism: Lower River Bann

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans she has to promote leisure tourism on the Lower River Bann system from Coleraine to Lough Neagh.

(AQW 2073/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) implements a series of seasonal marketing campaigns in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to grow both visitor numbers and spend to Northern Ireland. Lough Neagh has featured extensively in the spring, summer and autumn campaigns with the most recent being summer 2011 and NITB will continue to market the destination throughout 2011.

Tourism Ireland features Lough Neagh as part of its extensive global destination marketing programme. The aim is to raise awareness of Lough Neagh, and the areas surrounding it, as a tourism destination.

NITB, in partnership with the Countryside Access and Activities Network (CAAN), continues to develop and promote outdoor recreation opportunities. NITB also works with a number of activity providers who operate within the Lough Neagh and Lower Bann destination. The Lower Bann featured in the NITB Adventureland promotion in April 2011 and ran canoeing events to tie in with the major campaign. The plan is to repeat the Adventureland promotion in April 2012.

Recent capital investment by Ballymena Borough Council, including financial assistance from NITB, will enhance the water based infrastructure at Portglenone marina with plans to complete the final phase by 2013.

The draft Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland to 2020 has identified Lough Neagh as a potential "key tourism area". To successfully develop and promote product within relevant "key tourism areas" the Strategy recommends that it is the primary responsibility of the Local Authorities to develop and implement Tourism Area Plans in partnership with local tourism providers in the public and private sector.

NITB will support local areas by providing research, intelligence and advice in developing plans, aligning marketing and promotional activity and developing and implementing technology solutions to transform the provision and distribution of visitor information.

Multinational Companies

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what measures are in place to prevent multinational companies from undercutting local firms that cannot compete at the same price.

(AQW 2079/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Businesses operating in Northern Ireland are subject to the same competition legislation that applies in the rest of the United Kingdom. Price differences on the same goods or services is not, in itself, evidence of a breach of competition laws. Any information that a business is engaging in anti-competitive agreements or abuse of a dominant market position should be reported for investigation to the Office of Fair Trading. Their website address is www.oftrading.gov.uk.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the payments to Presbyterian Mutual Society savers, particularly those who lost over £100,000.

(AQW 2086/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Joint Supervisors of the Presbyterian Mutual Society (in Administration) issued payments, in accordance with the Scheme of Arrangement which was sanctioned by the High Court, to all creditors and shareholders who had proved their claims on 1st August 2011.

Energy: Domestic Electricity Consumption

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what proportion of domestic electricity consumption is sourced from nuclear power plants located outside Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2127/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The energy physically transferred into Northern Ireland from Great Britain through the Moyle Electricity Interconnector was 2496 Giga Watt hours over a twelve month period from September 2010 to August 2011. While nuclear energy provided some 16% of electricity consumed in Great Britain in 2010, the figures are not available to identify what proportion of the electricity transferred to Northern Ireland came from nuclear power plants and was used by domestic consumers.

Social Economy

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what contact she has had with the Minister of Finance and Personnel in relation to the need to measure and consider the benefits of the Social Economy in the procurement process.

(AQW 2137/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Minister of Finance and Personnel leads in relation to procurement processes. While I have had no formal discussions with the Minister in relation to the need to measure and consider the benefits of the Social Economy in the procurement process, my officials have met with their DFP counterparts to consider wider social economy issues in relation to developing and supporting the sector through the cross-departmental Social Economy Policy Group. This group is currently developing a new action plan, within the context of the Executive's emerging Economic Strategy, to further develop and support the social economy sector. This action plan will include targets in relation to procurement for the social economy sector.

I also understand that in August this year Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) published revised guidance specifically for Social Economy Enterprises designed to demystify the public procurement process and enable these bodies to better access procurement opportunities.

DETI: Land Deemed Surplus to Requirements

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what land in the North Down area her Department has deemed surplus to requirements.

(AQW 2141/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI holds land in support of economic development projects brought forward by qualifying businesses. In accordance with Department of Finance and Personnel guidelines, the organisation keeps its landholding under continual review.

In the North Down Council area Invest NI owns 60 acres of land of which 20 acres remain available to lease. It does not regard any of this land holding to be surplus to its requirements.

Tourism Ireland

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the current salary of Tourism Ireland's Chief Executive.

(AQW 2152/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The current salary for the Chief Executive of Tourism Ireland can be found in the Tourism Ireland Annual Report.

Superfast Broadband

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of whether the £4.4 million allocation from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport to roll out superfast broadband across Northern Ireland is sufficient to meet need.

(AQW 2206/11-15)

Mrs Foster: It is estimated that, with the completion of my Department's Next Generation Broadband Project and the roll-out of BT's own superfast broadband investment programme, by March 2012 approximately 89% of premises in Northern Ireland will be connected to a fibred access point.

This leaves around 11% of premises, which will tend to be located in the most expensive to reach areas, to which it will be necessary to find alternative means of deploying broadband services with speeds that are in line with the commitments of the UK Broadband Strategy. It is disappointing that Northern Ireland has been allocated only £4.4m under the UK Broadband Fund which is considerably less than the £10m bid that we submitted. I have written to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, to voice my concern but am reassured that he is considering funding a pilot project in Northern Ireland to explore ways of taking superfast broadband to all homes and businesses. My officials are continuing to engage with their counterparts in DCMS on this issue.

Tourism: Ballycastle and Rathlin Island

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what the Tourist Board has done to market (i) Ballycastle; and (ii) Rathlin Island in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2213/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board's (NITB) remit is to promote Northern Ireland (NI) to the domestic and Republic of Ireland (ROI) markets and each year a series of seasonal marketing campaigns are implemented in both markets to grow both visitor numbers and spend. Products featured are based on what motivates our key segments which were identified in a substantial research project and also what our research tells us the consumer wants to purchase.

In terms of Rathlin Island, it is featured within the NITB TV ads (30 seconds & 60 seconds) which appeared during the spring 2009, summer 2009 and spring 2010 campaigns. Further to this, Rathlin Island is referenced in each campaign within our Causeway Coastal Route advertorial which runs in both NI and ROI from spring 2009 (now 8 campaigns in total) until the present day.

In terms of the broader Causeway Coastal Route promotion, on which Ballycastle is situated, the area is always one of the key destinations featured in NITB campaigns and gains lots of exposure through press, advertorials, TV, and outdoor advertising.

Energy Prices

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps she will take to introduce social tariffs as a means of mitigating the harmful effects of energy prices on communities.

(AQW 2217/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I do not propose taking any steps to initiate social tariffs. To introduce such tariffs would be extremely complex and unlikely to solve the hardships caused by fuel poverty.

Motor Insurance

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions she has had with the Office of Fair Trading regarding the cost of motor insurance.

(AQW 2269/11-15)

Mrs Foster: None. Insurance is a reserved matter, outside the remit of my Department and, therefore, it would be inappropriate for me to make representations to the Office of Fair Trading.

Energy: Keypad Tariff

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps she is taking to prevent electricity customers who use the keypad tariff from being disadvantaged because of credits in their meters being defrayed when the increase in the electricity rate is applied on 1 October 2011.

(AQW 2283/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Power NI and Airtricity keypad pre-payment meter customers are currently being issued with a new code which they must use at their next top-up. Once a customer tops up their meter using this new code, their electricity use will be charged at the new rate from 1st October 2011. Customers with existing credit on their keypad meter who have not yet used this new code will continue to benefit from pre-increase electricity prices until they next top up their meter.

Employment: Jobs Created

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of jobs which have been created by (i) inward investment; and (ii) indigenous investors in each financial year since 2007 and to date in this financial year, broken down by district council area.

(AQW 2295/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Table 1 below shows the number of jobs expected to be created, which are described as 'Jobs Promoted', by (i) inward investment and (ii) indigenous investors; that had an offer of assistance approved by Invest NI between 1 April 2007 and 31 August 2011, broken down by District Council area and financial year. This represents the number of jobs that investors plan to create over the lifetime of assisted projects.

However, it should be noted that Invest NI does not allocate budgets by geographic areas such as District Councils. The geographic location of projects is determined by those businesses which bring forward projects suitable for Invest NI assistance and are based on their specific requirements.

TABLE 1: INVEST NI JOBS PROMOTED BY INWARD INVESTMENT AND INDIGENOUS INVESTORS IN EACH DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA (1ST APRIL 2007 TO 31ST AUGUST 2011)

DCA	External					Local				
	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Antrim	-	106	21	130	54	63	61	88	526	11
Ards	-	16	-	4	-	11	49	123	18	51
Armagh	-	-	3	-	-	84	80	71	40	36
Ballymena	-	-	17	-	-	56	151	16	50	11
Ballymoney	-	-	-	-	-	5	24	9	43	-
Banbridge	-	-	2	-	-	19	7	29	12	5
Belfast	737	1,255	1,128	1,430	3	194	292	242	194	68
Carrickfergus	-	-	-	196	-	13	22	29	7	11
Castlereagh	52	1	10	1	-	51	98	61	77	17
Coleraine	361	17	-	2	-	19	25	46	29	5

DCA	External					Local				
	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Cookstown	3	-	-	-	-	127	102	100	65	15
Craigavon	5	163	2	37	-	89	106	703	79	29
Derry	915	30	86	297	88	79	187	201	73	12
Down	-	-	15	-	-	64	73	41	59	25
Dungannon	81	27	53	1	-	132	218	95	163	59
Fermanagh	120	129	16	1	-	71	60	44	63	12
Larne	235	-	-	1	-	28	18	12	18	1
Limavady	-	-	2	-	-	9	16	3	27	-
Lisburn	12	29	106	131	1	118	85	90	136	176
Magherafelt	-	-	-	1	1	114	217	70	81	13
Moyle	-	-	-	-	-	37	16	8	14	-
Newry & Mourne	59	1,149	12	4	-	318	260	144	633	66
Newtownabbey	-	2	89	-	-	13	40	33	36	46
North Down	-	-	150	-	-	59	91	21	22	74
Omagh	95	27	-	35	-	39	9	35	26	38
Strabane	-	-	34	-	-	65	35	37	9	1
Not Yet Located	-	-	20	545	996	-	-	-	-	4
Total	2,675	2,951	1,766	2,816	1,143	1,877	2,342	2,347	2,496	786

Notes:

- Jobs promoted represent the number of jobs expected to be created by the project.
- 2011-12 figures are provisional and subject to change.

In addition, Invest NI supported over 7,500 new jobs indirectly through its Enterprise Development Programme (EDP) – formerly the Start A Business Programme. Table 2 shows the breakdown of these jobs across DCAs.

TABLE 2: INVEST NI ESTIMATED NUMBER OF JOBS SUPPORTED THROUGH THE ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME (EDP) BY DCA (1ST APRIL 2007 TO 31ST AUGUST 2011)

DCA	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Antrim	41	28	26	44	17
Ards	55	43	23	58	26
Armagh	61	44	50	62	31
Ballymena	63	36	23	37	23
Ballymoney	42	28	16	26	12
Banbridge	61	39	33	50	25
Belfast	235	187	196	293	120
Carrickfergus	22	21	17	18	17
Castlereagh	61	54	42	61	27
Coleraine	76	57	51	75	30
Cookstown	63	44	49	72	25
Craigavon	70	71	49	74	43

DCA	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Derry	169	100	76	89	71
Down	92	55	62	67	25
Dungannon	79	69	79	106	46
Fermanagh	147	94	69	80	33
Larne	56	32	31	36	19
Limavady	69	40	34	59	28
Lisburn	90	63	72	101	45
Magherafelt	78	42	50	71	22
Moyle	45	19	14	19	10
Newry & Mourne	125	69	61	100	47
Newtownabbey	59	47	51	82	36
North Down	52	42	32	66	25
Omagh	93	75	63	89	33
Strabane	55	34	49	45	20
Total	2,058	1,431	1,318	1,881	857

Notes:

1. An additional 10 jobs could not be allocated at DCA level.
2. These figures are based on an estimate of jobs created by an individual EDP offer. This estimation process is derived from an independent evaluation of the programme.
3. 2011-12 figures are provisional and subject to change.

Northern Ireland Tourist Board

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) whether the Northern Ireland Tourist Board was ever offered the opportunity to sponsor (a) Graeme McDowell; (b) Rory McIlroy; or (c) Darren Clarke; (ii) whether the opportunity was refused or accepted; and (iii) at what cost was the sponsorship available.

(AQW 2389/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board has never been offered an opportunity to sponsor (a) Graeme McDowell; (b) Rory McIlroy; or (c) Darren Clarke. However, NITB previously had an agreement with Rory McIlroy from 25th October 2007 to 31st December 2008 which allowed the use of his name and images in promotions. The cost for this agreement was £20,000.

Manufacturing: Ballymena, Ballymoney and Moyle

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assistance her Department is providing to the manufacturing industry in the (i) Ballymena Borough Council area; (ii) Ballymoney Borough Council area; and (iii) Moyle District Council area.

(AQW 2451/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The table below shows the amount of assistance offered by Invest NI to projects approved in the manufacturing and services sectors in (i) Ballymena, (ii) Ballymoney and (iii) Moyle District Council Areas (DCA) between 1st April 2006 and 31st March 2011.

ASSISTANCE OFFERED (£M) IN BALLYMENA, BALLYMONEY AND MOYLE DCAS BY GENERAL SECTOR (2006-07 - 2010-11)

DCA	Manufacturing	Services	Total
BALLYMENA	16.50	3.67	20.17
BALLYMONEY	1.11	0.59	1.70
MOYLE	0.39	0.82	1.21

Notes:

- 1 An additional £1,175 of assistance was offered, for which this level of detail is not available.
- 2 An additional £60,851 was offered to External Delivery Organisations, which are not classified by sector.
- 3 Sectors are based on the UK Standard Industrial Classifications (SIC) 2003.
- 4 Invest NI also indirectly offered support across the 3 DCAs totalling £180,000 through its Enterprise Development Programme (formerly Start A Business) delivered in partnership with Enterprise NI.

However, it should be noted that Invest NI does not allocate budgets by geographic areas such as District Councils. The geographic location of projects is determined by those businesses which bring forward projects suitable for Invest NI assistance and are based on their specific requirements.

Department of the Environment

National Park for Northern Ireland

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to establish a national park for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 1810/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): The Department has recently embarked on a public consultation exercise to take forward enabling legislation for national parks. There are a number of areas in Northern Ireland with the potential for designation as national parks. Therefore, in tandem with the consultation exercise, I am bringing together a panel of experts to advise me on which areas most closely fit the proposed criteria.

I am a strong believer in a model of national park being developed, different from other parts of these islands, in sympathy with our needs. This model would protect park areas and be a mechanism for positive economic growth.

Odour Pollution

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what protections are in place to restrict odour pollution in the countryside.

(AQW 1935/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Pollution Prevention and Control (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2003 (as amended) operate a permitting regime for specific installations which have the potential to cause environmental pollution. Permits require that installations are operated in such a way that no significant pollution is caused (including odour pollution). These Regulations cover large installations with potentially odorous activities such as intensive agriculture, rendering plant and landfill sites, and are enforced by NIEA and district councils. Non-compliance with permit conditions can lead to enforcement action, including the revocation of the permit.

Odours which cause a statutory nuisance and which emanate from smaller installations not covered by the PPC Regulations are dealt with under the Public Health (Ireland) Act 1878 by district councils, who

can investigate complaints from the public and if necessary take enforcement action. Such installations would include small, less intensive farms which are not regulated under the PPC regulations.

DARD advises that it has no protections in place to restrict odour pollution in the countryside. However DARD provides advice to farmers within the Code of Good Agricultural Practice for the Prevention of Pollution of Water, Air and Soil on reducing odour in the countryside related to agricultural activities. The advice focuses on steps farmers can take to minimise the risk of smell during storage and spreading of slurry, livestock manure and organic wastes. Full details of this advice are available in Section 11 of the Code on the DARD website at the link below.

http://www.dardni.gov.uk/ruralni/code_of_good_agricultural_practice_2008_cmb-3.pdf

Road Safety Grants: Budgets

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration his Department will give to delegating road safety grant budgets to local councils, rather than to a company in England to administer.

(AQW 1936/11-15)

Mr Attwood: In 2009 officials were tasked with reviewing Department policy with a view to engaging more fully on road safety issues with the voluntary and community sector. The outcome of that review was the decision to appoint an Intermediary Funding Body (IFB) to manage and deliver DOE funding to road safety projects proposed by the voluntary & community sector. It was envisaged that the engagement with an IFB would create potential to make full efficient and effective use of the available budget for allocation to the voluntary and community sector, increase the opportunity for the Department to engage with a wide range of bodies, thereby promoting an integrated partnership across Northern Ireland and address local road safety issues while mitigating against the risk of discrimination from local groups who wish to avail of funding.

In March 2011 the Department was notified that the company responsible for administering funding to the voluntary & community sector for 2010/11 would not be seeking to extend their contract.

Following an open competition managed by Central Procurement Directorate (CPD), a contract was awarded on 14 July 2011 to Community Transport Association (CTA) to act as the Department's Intermediary Funding Body (IFB) to administer grants to local road safety projects for the 2011/12 financial year with an option to extend the contract for a further two periods of one year each.

CTA (UK) is a charitable company registered in England, with a director and staff team operating as CTA (NI). CTA (NI) is the regional office of the CTA (UK). The Northern Ireland team has responsibility for delivering the Northern Ireland specific work programme and contracts. CTA (NI) is responsible for its own budget, business plan and operations. The NI Director is part of the CTA (UK) Senior Management Team.

The DOE road safety grant programme is being promoted, managed, delivered and monitored entirely by the team in Northern Ireland, the exception to this is the banking service which is being managed from England.

At the end of the first year of the contract an evaluation will be carried out to determine how effective the programme has been in delivering the objectives of the road safety grants scheme. Following the outcome of the evaluation a decision will be taken on the way forward; i.e. taking up the option to extend the contract with CTA for a second year or consider alternative options.

DOE: Arm's-length Bodies

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the cost to his Department of its arm's-length bodies in each of the last two years.

(AQW 1947/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The table below provides details of the costs associated with the Department's arms-length bodies for financial years 2009/10 to 2010/11.

	2009-10	2010-11
Statutory Advisory Councils	£128,977.17	£108,235.48

There was no cost to the Department for the Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee or the Local Government Staff Commission.

Road Safety Grants

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment why the application period for road safety grants for community groups is for the month of September only.

(AQW 2003/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The funding available for the 2011/12 road safety grants programme needs to be spent by 31st March 2012 in accordance with government accounting procedures.

Applications for grants would normally be invited in April or early May once availability of funding has been confirmed. However, the Department's appointed Intermediary Funding Body, at short notice, declined to the opportunity to extend their contract which made it impossible, in this financial year, to go out with an early call inviting applications for grants.

As my Department is committed to engaging with the voluntary and community sector and addressing local road safety issues through the provision of an effective funding model, officials quickly initiated a new public competition through Central Procurement Division (CPD).

Following open competition Community Transport Association (CTA) were awarded the contract on 14 July 2011, to act as the Department's new Intermediary Funding Body (IFB) to administer grants to local road safety projects.

CTA launched the new road safety grants scheme on 1st September inviting applications for grant funding. Applications for grants need to be received by 30th September 2011, for this first call for applications.

The short window of opportunity to submit applications is regrettable but necessary to ensure that all government accounting procedures are correctly followed and successful projects are given adequate time to draw down awards and spend the funding within the available timescale.

Community Transport Association will monitor the uptake of the road safety grants programme and if funding remains unallocated after the September applications have been assessed, a further promotion campaign will be initiated and a second call for application will be made, timescales permitting.

Bonfire Sites

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the costs incurred by each local council for cleaning and repairing Twelfth of July bonfire sites in 2011.

(AQW 2022/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The costs incurred by individual councils are set out in the table below.

District Council	2011 £
Antrim	1,500
Ards	3,920
Armagh	1157
Ballymena	7,807
Ballymoney	3,600

District Council	2011 £
Banbridge	1,000
Belfast	20,346
Carrickfergus	300
Castlereagh	8,097
Coleraine	300
Cookstown	3,000
Craigavon	16,514
Derry	3,384
Down	Nil
Dungannon and South Tyrone	Nil
Fermanagh	Nil
Larne	7,985
Limavady	668
*Lisburn	4,326
Magherafelt	2,800
Moyle	1,473
Newry and Mourne	Nil
Newtownabbey	770
North Down	1,000
Omagh	Nil
Strabane	Nil
Total	89,947

* One fire caused significant damage to a football pitch owned by Lisburn City Council. The costs of repair are not yet available.

Road Deaths

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he had to address deaths on the roads.
(AQW 2049/11-15)

Mr Attwood: My Department has lead responsibility for coordinating and driving forward road safety and a great deal is being done to move forward quickly measures that I believe will save lives on our roads.

As members will know, I am finalising plans and measures to deter drink driving, including reducing the drink drive limit. Subject to Executive approval, I expect to consult in early 2012 on a Road Traffic Amendment Bill to make the necessary legislative changes.

My Department consulted earlier this year on a range of measures aimed at reducing road deaths involving new drivers. Taking account of the consultation responses, an options paper is being

prepared on the way forward on reform of the Learner and Restricted Driver schemes and the possible introduction of a system of Graduated Driver Licensing. I will advise further on this in due course.

I am moving forward the mutual recognition of lesser road traffic infringements (offences incurring penalty points) across the island. Initial discussions with the Irish Minister for Transport are focusing on speeding, drink/drug driving, seat belt wearing and use of mobile phones while driving.

The Driver and Vehicle Agency is currently finalising an Enforcement and Compliance Strategy which will support regulations being introduced by my Department in respect of taxis, buses and goods vehicles.

Through its ongoing programme of road safety awareness campaigns my Department will continue to deliver road safety messages to all road users, with particular emphasis on those responsible for causing casualties and those most at risk.

Following an independent review of the Department's Road Safety Education Officer Service, which confirmed that the range of services and resources currently offered are in line with good practice, DOE will continue to inform and prepare children and young people to be safe and responsible road users.

My Department will continue to research road safety issues to ensure that we better target appropriate measures to address key problems. A current project will help inform how we address road safety problems experienced by older road users.

I would refer you to the Road Safety Strategy up to 2020 for details on other planned road safety measures.

Dog Fouling

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how many people have been convicted of dog fouling offences in each of the last five years, in each local council area.

(AQW 2063/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Convictions for dog fouling offences for the last five years are listed below. District councils are more likely to offer the opportunity of discharging any liability to conviction for the offence by payment of a fixed penalty.

District Council	No. of successful prosecutions				
	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9	2009/10	2010/11
Belfast City Council	7	3	3	6	84
Coleraine Borough Council	-	-	1	3	-
Cookstown District Council	-	-	-	-	1
Craigavon Borough Council	-	1	-	8	2
Down District Council	1	1	-	1	-
Larne Borough Council	1	1	1	-	-
Moyle District Council	-	-	2	-	-
Newtownabbey Borough Council	4	1	-	1	1
Strabane District Council	-	-	-	-	1
Totals	13	7	7	19	89

Tree Cutting

Ms Lo asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) what provisions are in place to ensure that routine preventative trimming occurs outside the main bird nesting season; (ii) what mechanisms of enforcement are in place to ensure that tree-cutting stops upon discovery of a bird's nest; and (iii) how many fines have been issued in the last year against those who have removed or destroyed birds' nests in order to cut or trim trees.

(AQW 2085/11-15)

Mr Attwood: All nesting birds are protected under the terms of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985(As amended). This legislation states that if any person intentionally or recklessly kills, injures or takes any wild bird; or takes, damages or destroys the nest of any wild bird while that nest is in use or being built; obstructs or prevents any wild bird from using its nest; or takes or destroys an egg of any wild bird, he shall be guilty of an offence.

The Wildlife (NI) Order 1985 does not specify dates in relation to a bird breeding season; however my department advises the public not to trim hedges or cut trees between March and August, as this is the main breeding period for most of our resident bird species.

The situation is slightly different for farmers. In order to receive their full agricultural subsidy, farmers must adhere to a range of conditions that have been set by the Department of Agriculture (DARD). One of these conditions specifies that hedges must not be cut between 1st March and 31st August.

NIEA staff refer callers reporting disturbance of nesting birds to their local PSNI station, as wildlife crime is investigated by the police. The PSNI may decide to ask that no further work is undertaken until either the end of the bird breeding season, or until a decision has been made on a case for prosecution.

The Department receives a large volume of telephone enquiries during the bird breeding season and the majority of responses are mainly advisory in nature. The PSNI prefer to have the report first hand from the individual callers forwarding bird disturbance complaints. The PSNI do not generally inform the Department of the eventual outcome and hence details of prosecutions relating to these offences are not kept by NIEA.

Planning Enforcement Notices

Mr Craig asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of Planning Enforcement Notices served for illegal developments in each of the last five years, broken down by Planning Service office.

(AQW 2092/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The number of planning enforcement notices served in each of the last five years broken down by Divisional Office is set out in the table below.

Division	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Ballymena	12	11	15	48	22
Belfast	11	22	47	36	19
Craigavon	55	16	44	136	121
Downpatrick	7	11	6	0	9
Northern	28	23	23	53	23
Omagh	77	98	96	110	69
HQ	7	13	27	45	40
Total	197	194	258	428	303

Road Safety Grants: Budgets

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how much funding was (i) spent on administration; (ii) allocated; and (iii) unspent in the last tranche of the road safety grant budget for community groups.

(AQW 2106/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The 2010/11 contract to deliver funding to the voluntary and community sector in respect of road safety projects was managed by UnLtd. The total budget available was £160,000. The funding breaks down as follows:

Administration	Grant allocations	Unspent
£22,400	£159,308	£7,031.80

Road Safety Grants

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how much funding is available for allocation to road safety grants for community groups.

(AQW 2107/11-15)

Mr Attwood: For 2011/12 the Department has an overall budget of £160,000 of which £140,000 is available for specific road safety projects proposed by the voluntary and community sector, subject to completion of the normal bidding and evaluation procedures.

Road Safety Grants

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the cost of administering road safety grants in the current tranche of the road safety budget for community groups.

(AQW 2108/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The cost of administering road safety grants for the voluntary and community sector for 2011/12 will not exceed £20,531 (12.8% of the total budget).

Magherafelt Area Plan

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the draft Magherafelt Area Plan.

(AQW 2168/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department received the Report on the Independent Examination into Objections to the Draft Magherafelt Plan from the Planning Appeals Commission on 31 January 2011.

The Department expects to complete its consideration of the Commissioners' Report in the very near future. Adoption of the final Plan is currently programmed for December 2011.

Rose Energy Incinerator at Glenavy

Mr Frew asked the Minister of the Environment, given the concerns of the poultry sector, when a decision will be made on Rose Energy's proposal for an incinerator at Glenavy.

(AQW 2273/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The former Minister's announcement of August 2010 was the subject of judicial review proceedings. Lord Justice McCloskey adjourned the judicial review proceedings on 2 March 2011 on the basis that the application process had not been completed.

The applicants subsequently submitted further environmental information that is currently being considered by the Department. When the consideration of this information has been finalised the Department will then make a recommendation to the Minister on the way forward.

Rose Energy Incinerator at Glenavy

Mr Swann asked the Minister of the Environment why Planning Service has not implemented the decision of the previous Minister to approve Rose Energy's application for an incinerator at Glenavy. (AQW 2342/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The former Minister's announcement of August 2010 was the subject of judicial review proceedings. Lord Justice McCloskey adjourned the judicial review proceedings on 2 March 2011 on the basis that the application process had not been completed.

The applicants subsequently submitted further environmental information that is currently being considered by the Department. When the consideration of this information has been finalised the Department will then make a recommendation to the Minister on the way forward.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Civil Service: Secondments

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) what opportunities exist for senior civil servants to be seconded to the private sector; and (ii) in such cases, what arrangements are in place to deal with pension contributions and other employer contributions. (AQW 1925/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Outward secondment is an integral part of the HR policies of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS). There is scope to second senior civil servants to a range of organisations, including to the private sector, using NICS secondment arrangements and through the Northern Ireland Interchange Scheme, of which the NICS is a partner.

During a period of secondment the secondee remains a civil servant and remains subject to NICS terms and conditions of service. The NICS continues to be responsible for the payment of salary costs, pension and other employer contributions.

Civil Service: Secondments

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) under what conditions might senior civil servants be seconded to the private sector; and (ii) how his Department ensures that there is no conflict of interest, particularly if the seconding employer is, or was or may in the future be in, a position in the future to provide advice to the Government. (AQW 1927/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Outward secondment is an integral part of the HR policies of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS). There is scope to second all civil servants, including senior civil servants, to a range of organisations, including to the private sector, using NICS secondment arrangements and through the Northern Ireland Interchange Scheme of which the NICS is a partner.

When a secondment is arranged a tripartite agreement between the employing department, the secondee and the host organisation is normally drawn up and covers, amongst other things, issues relating to conflict of interest.

Civil Service: Secondments

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) to which company the former Permanent Secretary to the Department for Regional Development has been seconded; and (ii) whether any part of his salary or pension is being paid out of public funds. (AQW 1944/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The secondment agreement between the employing department, the host organisation and the secondee makes provision for confidentiality regarding the details of the secondment, including the name of the host organisation.

During a period of secondment a secondee continues to be a civil servant and is subject to NICS terms and conditions of service. The NICS continues to be responsible for making salary payments directly to the secondee, for arranging deductions from salary in respect of income tax, National Insurance and pension contributions and for making employers' contributions in respect of National Insurance and pension contributions, provided that the secondee remains in the civil service superannuation scheme. On occasions, the NICS will recoup salary costs from the host organisation.

Civil Service: Grievances and Dignity at Work Complaints

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) how many grievances and dignity at work complaints have been closed in the Civil Service in each of the last three years, broken down by each Department; and (ii) the average time it took for these complaints to be closed.

(AQW 1968/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The information requested is set out in the attached tables.

The total number of dignity at work cases closed by department for each of the last three financial years.

Department	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011
DARD	3	4	11
DCAL	0	0	0
DE	0	2	2
DEL	1	1	4
DETI	0	0	0
DFFP	3	9	14
DHSSPS	0	0	0
DOE	1	9	14
DOJ*	N/A	N/A	2
DRD	3	3	15
DSD	12	10	28
NIO*	2	6	N/A
OFMDFM	0	1	0
PPS**	N/A	N/A	3

The total number of grievance cases closed by department for each of the last three financial years.

Department	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011
DARD	11	15	30
DCAL	0	1	3
DE	2	5	5
DEL	1	11	11

Department	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011
DETI	2	1	0
DFP	4	11	30
DHSSPS	1	3	1
DOE	11	17	9
DOJ*	N/A	N/A	3
DRD	6	16	25
DSD	19	68	88
NIO*	3	11	N/A
OFMDFM	0	0	0
PPS**	N/A	N/A	1

* DOJ came into existence in April 2010 following devolution of policing and justice.

** Public Prosecution Service was a legal office of the NIO prior to the 12th April 2010.

The average (median) time taken to close dignity at work cases over the three year period 2008/09 - 2010/11 was 121 days.

The average (median) time taken to close grievance cases over the three year period 2008/09 - 2010/11 was 163.5 days.

Stormont Estate: Speed Detection Equipment

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the cost of installing the speed detection equipment in the Stormont Estate.

(AQW 1986/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The cost to install the speed detection equipment is not available as a separate item. The equipment is being installed as part of a traffic calming study being undertaken by DRD Roads Service at a total cost of £800.

Belfast Harbour Commissioners

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) for an update on the Executive's pursuit of funds held by the Belfast Harbour Commissioners; and (ii) whether these funds can be lawfully released to the Executive in view of the statutory framework within which the Belfast Harbour Commissioners operate.

(AQW 2101/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The DRD Minister is currently pursuing the issue of a contribution from the reserves managed by the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. The DRD Minister will then report his recommendations to the Budget Review Group. Whatever he recommends will take account of the legal position regarding the Commissioners making such a contribution.

Peace III Funding

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action his Department can take to reduce the bureaucracy and paper work involved in the delivery of Peace III funding for community organisations.

(AQW 2231/11-15)

Mr Wilson: My Department and the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), PEACE III Managing Authority, acknowledge the complexity of EU funding requirements. DFP's role in this programme is purely as sponsor department for SEUPB. It has no direct role in the delivery of the programme, this responsibility lies solely with SEUPB as managing authority.

SEUPB is continually looking at means for simplifying its administrative processes and has produced comprehensive guidance notes to assist applicants and project managers to handle the procedures relating to PEACE III funding. The guidance notes are distributed to all projects, and are available on the SEUPB's website at www.seupb.eu.

However, the administrative requirements for EU funding derive from the rules of the EU itself and from our own regulations and guidance regarding the management of public money. These are a necessary and integral part of the management of EU funds, intended to ensure probity and value for money.

Tourism: VAT

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what discussions he has had with Her Majesty's Treasury in relation to reducing VAT for the tourism industry.

(AQW 2238/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The rate of Value Added Tax (VAT) is a Reserved Matter for HM Treasury to determine. In announcing the increase in the standard rate of VAT to 20 per cent in Budget 2010, the Chancellor indicated that this was one of a series of measures to tackle the deficit. There are no indications that the Government would be willing to consider reducing VAT on tourism related products and therefore I have not had any discussions with the Treasury in this regard.

Civil Partnerships

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many civil partnerships, to date, have been (i) registered; and (ii) dissolved.

(AQW 2242/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Between 19th December 2005 and 31st March 2011 there were 549 civil partnerships registered in Northern Ireland.

During the same period three civil partnerships have been legally dissolved in Northern Ireland. Civil partnerships entered into in Northern Ireland can be legally dissolved outside Northern Ireland and civil partnerships legally dissolved in Northern Ireland may have been entered into outside Northern Ireland.

Energy Efficiency

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) what standards of energy efficiency are in place for newly built housing; and (ii) whether he has considered introducing legislation to increase these standards, given the increasing prevalence of fuel poverty.

(AQW 2274/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Measures relating to conservation of fuel and power, which apply to all new buildings, have been included in the Northern Ireland Building Regulations since 1973. Current requirements for the energy efficiency of new housing are as set out in The Building (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006, SR 2006 No.440, which came into operation on 30 November 2006.

A proposed amendment, further tightening these standards, is currently out for public consultation. Details are included in "Consultation on proposals for the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland): Phase Two" which may be viewed at: www.buildingregulationsni.gov.uk.

Green New Deal Housing Pilot Programme

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if the Green New Deal Housing Pilot Programme is successful, whether he will provide funding to the Minister for Social Development to implement the scheme across Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2275/11-15)

Mr Wilson: As illustrated in the published document Budget 2011-15, the Executive has made provision for Green New Deal funding at a level of £4 million per annum across the years 2012-13 to 2014-15. This funding is predicated upon a business case being approved by the Department for Social Development and subsequently, by the Department of Finance & Personnel.

Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he has considered implementing any of the recommendations made in the Report by the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress.

(AQW 2345/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is taking forward a programme of work aimed at defining and measuring National Well-being. This is consistent with wider international projects including the report of the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress. Officials in the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency are closely monitoring developments.

End-year Flexibility

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) what access to the reserve has been necessary in each financial year since 2007/08; and (ii) what recoupment there has been from End Year Flexibility.

(AQW 2397/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Northern Ireland Executive has been given permission to access the HM Treasury reserve on five occasions since 2007-08. These are detailed in the table overleaf.

On each of these occasions the Executive obtained agreement from HM Treasury that these amounts would not be recouped from End Year Flexibility stocks that existed at that time.

Reserve Claim	Financial Year	Resource DEL	£million	
			Capital DEL	
Equal Pay	2009-10	131.0	-	
PSNI Funding to deal with the exceptional Security funding	2010-11	37.4	12.9	
Student Loans	2010-11	50.0	-	
PSNI Hearing Loss Funding	2010-11	11.0	-	
Legal Aid Funding	2010-11	19.2	-	

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

HSSPS: Arm's-length Bodies

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost to his Department of its arm's-length bodies in each of the last two years. (AQW 2013/11-15)

Mr Poole (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The total allocations made by my Department to its Arm's-Length Bodies in the last two years are set out below. The majority of these allocations fund health and social care provision across N. Ireland.

	2009/10				2010/11			
	Current £k	Capital £k	Non-cash £k	Total £k	Current £k	Capital £k	Non-cash £k	Total £k
Health & Social Care Board (1)	3,174,528	4,219	7,431	3,186,178	3,841,564	4,011	10,451	3,856,026
Public Health Agency	68,643	104	0	68,747	69,636	76	77	69,789
Patient Client Council	1,548	0	10	1,558	1,639	15	12	1,666
Business Services Organisation	37,326	3,222	5,471	46,019	23,964	4,878	6,059	34,901
NI Fire & Rescue Service	79,608	3,335	0	82,943	77,315	6,066	0	83,381
NI Blood Transfusion Service	0	254	803	1,057	0	132	425	557
NI Medical & Dental Training Agency	49,471	0	0	49,471	52,220	9	0	52,229
NI Practice & Education Council	1,428	0	35	1,463	1,307	20	383	1,710
NI Social Care Council	3,123	0	53	3,176	3,116	19	32	3,167
NI Guardian ad litem Agency	3,521	58	84	3,663	3,642	50	86	3,778

	2009/10				2010/11			
	Current £k	Capital £k	Non-cash £k	Total £k	Current £k	Capital £k	Non-cash £k	Total £k
Registration & Quality Improvement Authority	6,087	50	74	6,211	6,312	12	89	6,413

Note: (1) Includes allocations to HSC Trusts – see table below.

	2009/10				2010/11			
	Current(1) £k	Capital(2) £k	Non-cash(2) £k	Total £k	Current(1) £k	Capital(2) £k	Non-cash(2) £k	Total £k
Belfast Trust	985,781	87,629	74,667	1,148,077	1,024,385	63,511	44,797	1,132,693
Southern Trust	452,286	25,573	20,882	498,741	460,569	35,148	20,514	516,231
South Eastern Trust	435,893	34,755	25,284	495,932	447,361	40,883	24,244	512,488
Northern Trust	529,206	20,169	26,925	576,300	532,837	10,634	20,118	563,589
Western Trust	424,773	21,097	26,982	472,852	442,845	25,304	17,400	485,549
NI Ambulance Service	52,608	4,612	4,554	61,774	49,043	2,969	3,448	55,460

Allocations to the HSC Trusts were as follows:

Notes: (1) Current expenditure allocations to Trusts are made by the HSCB, not the Department.

(2) Capital and non-cash allocations are made directly to Trusts by the Department.

PARIS System

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the commercial arrangement that is in place between the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and Civica and Hewlett-Packard for the delivery of the PARIS system; and (ii) whether he will make the business case that was submitted for the approval of spend available to the public.

(AQW 2025/11-15)

Mr Poots: The PARIS system has been procured for the Belfast Trust under the Technology Partner Framework Agreement. Hewlett-Packard is the Contractor and Civica is the sub-contractor.

The Business Case can be made available to the public.

Cancer Treatment: Waiting Times

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what positive lessons have been learnt through information sharing with other UK administrations about waiting times for cancer treatment, as referred to in the Department of Finance and Personnel's memorandum on the eighth and ninth reports from the Public Accounts Committee.

(AQW 2045/11-15)

Mr Poots: I can advise that officials from the HSC Board are in regular contact with colleagues in the other UK administrations to share information, identify best practice and learn any positive lessons. In particular, the Northern Ireland Cancer Network (NICaN) regularly attends meetings with other UK-wide cancer networks, where information is exchanged and best practice is shared.

Engagement with Welsh and English administrations has highlighted the importance of areas such as patient pathways, information systems, prospective patient management, inter trust transfer mechanisms, clinical engagement and clear communication of targets in achieving and sustaining improved waiting times for cancer treatment.

Action to take forward improvements in these areas is ongoing across the region. For example, a range of regionally agreed patient pathways have been developed to improve patient flow (i.e. referral to a central point; one stop shops etc). Patient Navigators are employed at each Trust to proactively manage patients through the pathway so that potential breaches are avoided or delays minimized. Inter Trust diagnostic protocols have also been agreed which outline the patient information and tests that need to travel with the patient in order to allow the receiving trust to commence investigations and treatment as early as possible.

I want to assure you that my Department and the HSC Board will continue to work closely with the Trusts and NICaN to ensure patients have timely access to diagnosis and treatment.

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence Guidance

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) whether his Department has endorsed any of the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidance published since 1 July 2006; and (ii) how his Department assesses the implementation of any such guidance endorsed for use by Health and Social Care Trusts.

(AQW 2046/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department has either reviewed or is in the process of reviewing all National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) Technology Appraisals and Clinical Guidelines published since 1 July 2006 for their applicability in Northern Ireland and endorsed them where appropriate. A list of this endorsed guidance can be found on my Department's website.

The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) is responsible for reviewing clinical and social care governance arrangements in individual HSC Trusts against a range of quality standards on an on-

going basis. This includes compliance with best practice guidance concerned with safe and effective care such as NICE guidelines.

The process for the endorsement, implementation, monitoring and assurance of NICE Technology Appraisals and Clinical Guidelines has recently been reviewed. Under the new arrangements my Department requires the Health and Social Care Board to formally report annually on the progress made generally in commissioning services in accordance with Departmentally-endorsed NICE guidance.

For further independent assurance, the Guidelines and Audit Implementation Network (GAIN) and the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) will review the implementation of a small number of Technology Appraisals and Clinical Guidelines respectively each year. The circular outlining the new process can be found on my Department's website.

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence Guidance

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the average length of time taken by his Department to review the applicability of the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidance.

(AQW 2089/11-15)

Mr Poots: Until now the length of time taken by my Department to review the applicability of National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) Technology Appraisals and Clinical Guidelines has varied depending on the complexity of the guidance and the contextual issues relating to implementing the guidance in Northern Ireland.

The process for the endorsement, implementation, monitoring and assurance of NICE Technology Appraisals and Clinical Guidelines has recently been reviewed. Under this new process, the local review of the applicability of NICE technology appraisals is expected to be complete within 4 weeks of the final publication by NICE and the majority of NICE clinical guidelines are expected to be reviewed within 8 weeks of publication by NICE. The circular outlining the new process can be found on my Department's website.

Emergency Ambulances

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for this year, to date, in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, to detail (i) the average response times of emergency ambulances to 999 calls; (ii) the proportion of 999 calls which resulted in the need for a patient to be transferred to hospital; and (iii) the (a) average; and (b) longest waiting times for the arrival of an ambulance capable of transferring a patient to hospital.

(AQW 2102/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department currently monitors ambulance response times on the basis that 72.5% of all Category A (life-threatening) calls are responded to within eight minutes (and not less than 67.5% in any Local Commissioning Group (LCG) area).

- (i) Information on the average response times of emergency ambulances to 999 calls in the Northern HSC Trust since 1st January 2011 is not available. However, information is available on the proportion of Category A (Immediately life threatening) calls which resulted in the arrival of an emergency response at the scene within 8 minutes. Between 1st January and 31st August 2011, 64.3% of all Category A calls in the Northern LCG area resulted in an emergency response vehicle arriving at the scene within 8 minutes, with 96.5% arriving within 21 minutes.
- (ii) Information on the percentage of 999 calls which resulted in the need for a patient to be transferred to hospital is not available. However, information is available on the number of patients who were transported to hospital following the arrival of an emergency response vehicle responding to a Category A call. Between 1st January and 31st August 2011, 5,773 patients were transported to hospital by an emergency response vehicle responding to a Category A call in the Northern LCG area.

- (iii) (a) Between 1st January and 31st August 2011, the average length of time for the arrival of an ambulance capable of transferring a patient to hospital in the Northern LCG area, following a Category A call, was 10 minutes 34 seconds. However, during this time, the average response time by all types of emergency response vehicles (ambulance or rapid response vehicle) to Category A calls in the Northern LCG area was 7 minutes 34 seconds.
- (b) Since 1st January 2011, the longest waiting time for the arrival of an ambulance capable of transferring a patient to hospital in the Northern LCG area following a Category A call, was 1 hour 23 minutes. On this occasion, the reasons for the delay were that the address provided by the caller did not match the details on the navigational equipment used by the NIAS, and at the time the NIAS were experiencing a high volume of calls.

NHS: Locum Appointments for Service Grade

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the benefits for (i) patients; (ii) junior doctor training; and (iii) the taxpayer of the introduction of locum appointments for service grade and the responsibility for the allocation of training posts being given to the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency in August 2010.

(AQW 2103/11-15)

Mr Poots:

(i) Benefit of LAS appointments for the Patient;

LAS appointments are used by Trusts to fill short-term vacancies, which would otherwise remain vacant. These appointees are required to meet specific criteria which has been (nationally agreed), thus ensuring that appointees are competent to undertake the duties given to them. This, together with robust recruitment protocols, ensures that patients are seen by competent junior doctors, who are supported by an appropriate clinical supervisor.

(ii) Benefit to junior doctors in training.

Appointees can use their time in LAS appointments to study for Royal College Examinations, and may also be helpful in allowing appointees to develop skills in a different area, prior to applying for a placement in a specified training programme.

In addition time spent in LAS posts can be used as part of the evidence required for a CESR (Certificate of Eligibility for Specialist Registration) application.

(iii) Benefit to the taxpayer.

The rates at which LAS payments are made are struck at national level using advice independent of Government. This helps ensure rates offer value for money for the taxpayer.

As an arms length body of the Department, the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency (NIMDTA), like similar deaneries in the United Kingdom, can provide the necessary level of expertise and knowledge to ensure that regulated standards of training and education for junior doctors are sufficiently met and, simultaneously, operationally manage a complex recruitment, selection and placement process. The role of NIMDTA was not changed in 2010, it has always been the case that Deanery approval is required for all training posts in Northern Ireland.

Antrim Area Hospital: MRI Scan Cost

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of an MRI scan performed at the Antrim Area Hospital, including the appointment letter and report in (i) 2008; (ii) 2009; and (iii) 2010.

(AQW 2116/11-15)

Mr Poots: The table below details the information requested:

Year	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Cost	£185.11*	£176.03*	£140.80*

*Average costs as provided by Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Pharmacies

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he will carry out a needs assessment of independent community pharmacies taking account of Northern Ireland factors.

(AQW 2117/11-15)

Mr Poots: Community Pharmacy NI, the representative body for community pharmacists in Northern Ireland, successfully sought a Judicial Review of newly introduced remuneration and reimbursement arrangements for community pharmacists. Until the result of the recent hearing is known, it would not be appropriate for me to make any further comment on this issue.

Pharmacies

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration has been given to the proposals by community pharmacies in relation to savings within his Department's budget.

(AQW 2118/11-15)

Mr Poots: Community Pharmacy NI, the representative body for community pharmacists in Northern Ireland, successfully sought a Judicial Review of newly introduced remuneration and reimbursement arrangements for community pharmacists. Until the result of the recent hearing is known, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the detail of any such proposals.

Pharmacies

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he will examine the contract in Scotland for the provision of pharmaceutical care services when considering a new pharmacy contract.

(AQW 2119/11-15)

Mr Poots: The HSC Board have been mandated by my Department to develop a Community Pharmacy Contract with Community Pharmacy NI (CPNI), which is the representative body for community pharmacy in Northern Ireland. Examples of good practice from Scotland and elsewhere will be considered in the development of a new contract,

Due to the ongoing Judicial Review instigated by CPNI of the recently introduced remuneration and reimbursement arrangements for community pharmacists it would be inappropriate for me as Minister to comment further on the development of a pharmacy contract for Northern Ireland until the outcome of the hearing is known.

Bangor Hospital: Diabetes Clinic

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the reasons for the closure of the diabetes clinic in Bangor Hospital.

(AQW 2132/11-15)

Mr Poots: The provision of outpatient clinics is an operational matter for Health and Social Services Trusts. The South Eastern Trust has advised that the weekly diabetic clinic held in Bangor Community Hospital has been discontinued on a temporary basis as a result of a consultant retirement. The Trust will be recruiting a new consultant and in the interim patients will be seen at either the Ulster or Ards Hospitals.

Inflammatory Bowel Disease

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of (a) full-time; and (b) part-time nurses specialising in Inflammatory Bowel Disease; (ii) where they are based; and (iii) whether he has any plans to expand this service.

(AQW 2164/11-15)

Mr Poots:

(i) (ii)

At September 2011, there was 1 (0.33 Whole-time Equivalent) nurse specialising in Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) based at Causeway Hospital.

Source: Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Trusts

(iii)

In 2011/12, the Health and Social Care Board will invest an additional £1.5m in biologic therapies to make further progress with the implementation of NICE guidance for the treatment of Crohn's disease.

It is expected that by the end of 2011/12 Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts should have increased the number of IBD clinical nurse specialists so that there is 0.5WTE in each of the Northern, Southern, Western and South Eastern HSC Trusts and 0.75 WTE in the Belfast HSC Trust, that is 2.75WTE in total. This will provide an enhanced level of care for patients with severe IBD.

Methadone

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the four deaths from methadone abuse in Gateshead, England, a contributory factor to which appeared to be a loophole in legislation allowing the sale of methadone by registered users, whether he will review the relevant legislation to ensure that similar tragedies are avoided in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2170/11-15)

Mr Poots: Substitute prescribing is the controlled prescribing of opiate medication to illicit opiate users, usually heroin users, as part of an overall care plan. The aim is to improve the physical and mental health of local opiate users and substitute prescribing has been shown to increase engagement with overall treatment plans, reduce illicit opiate use and its associated harm, and also contribute to lifestyle stabilisation. As part of this initiative, clients can be prescribed a range of substances but most commonly methadone or buprenorphine.

All substitute prescribing in Northern Ireland is undertaken in accordance with the Drug Misuse Dependence UK Guidelines on Clinical Management 2007 (the "Orange Book"). This recommends daily supervision, with one weekly take home dose for a period of three months for clients. It is only when the patient is assessed by Community Addiction Teams as "stable" that the multidisciplinary decision for additional unsupervised doses is taken.

It would be inappropriate for me to comment directly on any of the individual cases in Gateshead. However, under the Misuse of Drugs Act it is illegal for anyone in receipt of a prescribed medication, including methadone, to sell on that medicine. Once a patient takes possession of any prescribed medication, the prescriber cannot retain control over the medication, as at that point it becomes the clients property and responsibility.

A number of governance arrangements are in place to minimise the risk associated with unsupervised swallow, these include:-

- shared care arrangements for clients to have their medication dispensed;
- availability of training for all health care professionals involved in the Substitute Prescribing process;
- prior to the commencement of a shared care arrangement, an agreement is drawn up between the client, the prescriber, the key worker and the dispensing pharmacist which outlines the

responsibilities of the client committing to this service. This includes emphasising to the client that it is illegal to divert their medication;

- undertaking a detailed client assessment before unsupervised swallow is allowed;
- regular patient review during treatment – this includes ongoing risk assessment, regular drug testing and assessment of suitability for take home dose.

Multi Drug Resistant Tuberculosis

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety given that the number of cases of Multi Drug Resistant Tuberculosis in London has doubled in the last two years, whether he will liaise with his counterpart in England to ensure that Northern Ireland is ready for any increase in cases in the coming months.

(AQW 2171/11-15)

Mr Poots: TB is a notifiable disease and all confirmed and suspected cases are notified to the Public Health Agency (PHA) to enable appropriate public health measures to be taken. The PHA carefully monitors the number of cases of Multi Drug Resistant Tuberculosis (MDR TB) in Northern Ireland and liaises with Health and Social Care Trusts about the appropriate public health measures for these patients. It also works closely with the Health Protection Agency about the trends in England. In Northern Ireland the Health and Social Care service is prepared should there be an increase in cases of MDR TB.

Fire and Rescue Service: False Alarms

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) how many people have been prosecuted in each of the last three years for calling out the Fire and Rescue Service on false alarms; and (ii) the total cost of these false alarms.

(AQW 2184/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) does not hold information on prosecutions for offences relating to false alarms; such prosecutions are a matter for the PSNI.

The estimated total cost of false alarms to NIFRS in each of the last three years is shown in the table.

False Alarms (Mobilised)	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
False Alarms - Malicious (Hoax Calls)	£2,824,430	£2,693,000	£2,064,699

The costs are based on an average NIFRS cost per mobilised incident for each of the respective years.

Ambulances

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) how many ambulances are currently available for use by emergency services; and (ii) what is the average (a) year of manufacturer; and (b) mileage of these vehicles.

(AQW 2185/11-15)

Mr Poots: I have been advised by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service that it has 120 emergency ambulances currently available for use by the emergency services; the average age of these vehicles is 4.2 years and average mileage, 131,587 miles.

NHS: Nurses on Temporary Contracts

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of nurses on temporary contracts; and (ii) the average length of each contract, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 2186/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is provided in the table below.

Number of Qualified Nurses employed on temporary contracts within Northern Ireland Health and Social Care and the average length of each contract by Trust at September 2011

Trust	Headcount	WTE	Average Contract Length
Belfast	54	44.52	34 months
Northern	77	57.83	15 months
South Eastern	52	42.66	Under 12 months
Southern	31	23.61	19 months
Western	224	201.59	22 months

Source: Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Trusts

Notes:

1. WTE = Whole-time Equivalent.
2. Figures include qualified nurses only and exclude bank nurses.

Multiple System Atrophy

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many nurses are specialising in Multiple System Atrophy.

(AQW 2188/11-15)

Mr Poots: Multiple System Atrophy (MSA) is a rare condition that causes symptoms similar to advanced Parkinson's Disease. There are no nurses specialising in Multiple System Atrophy employed within Northern Ireland Health and Social Care. Instead these patients will be seen by nurses specialising in Parkinson's Disease. Information on the number of nurses specialising in Parkinson's Disease is provided in the table below.

Nurses specialising in Parkinson's Disease employed within Northern Ireland Health and Social Care by Trust at September 2011

Trust	Headcount	WTE
Belfast	2	1.80
Northern	1	1.00
South Eastern	0	0.00
Southern	1	1.00
Western	2	2.00
Total	6	5.80

Source: Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Trusts

Notes:

1. WTE = Whole-time Equivalent.
2. The 2 (1.80 WTE) staff based at Belfast Trust also cover the South Eastern Trust area and parts of the Northern Trust area as well as Belfast.

Multiple System Atrophy

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he has discussed, or intends to discuss, with his counterpart in Dublin the development of an all-island strategy on the treatment of people with Multiple System Atrophy and support for their carers.

(AQW 2191/11-15)

Mr Poots: There are currently no plans to develop a cross-border strategy on the treatment of people with Multiple System Atrophy (MSA). However, my Department is currently developing policies which will benefit those with MSA and their carers, including a Physical and Sensory Disability Strategy and Action Plan, and a Policy Framework "Living with Long Term Conditions". In addition, the Health and Social Care Board is currently evaluating the implementation of the 2002 Review of Adult Neurology Services.

Furthermore, a Neurological Conditions Network has been established by my Department to ensure, through a multi-disciplinary and coordinated approach, the best possible outcomes for people with long term neurological conditions, such as MSA, and it is progressing well.

NHS: Generic Drugs

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether his Department has had any discussions with GPs and pharmacies in relation to the savings that could be made by prescribing generic drugs instead of branded drugs.

(AQW 2193/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department's policy is that, where it is appropriate to do so, a medicine should be prescribed generically. The use of generic medicines in favour of branded equivalents is a central strand in the Department's strategy to promote improved quality in medicines management through cost effective prescribing. GPs and pharmacists are updated regularly on generic prescribing policy. In July and August this year the Department also wrote to the HSC Board and Trusts and to all GPs and community pharmacists to re-affirm the Department's policy on the best use of medicines – including the need to adhere to the policy on generic prescribing.

The current position is for the clinician or GP, in consultation with their patient, to decide on the most appropriate course of treatment for the patient and to prescribe the medication to best support that treatment. There have always been clear instructions for prescribers and dispensers that there are situations where it remains appropriate for branded drugs to be prescribed and dispensed.

Northern Ireland Myalgic Encephalomyelitis Working Group

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the last meeting of the Northern Ireland Myalgic Encephalomyelitis Working Group took place and when it is next due to meet.

(AQW 2195/11-15)

Mr Poots: I refer the member to the answer I gave in AQW1335/11-15 answered on 14 July 2011.

Looked-after Children

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what financial assistance is available in each Health and Social Care Trust for looked after children who wish to undertake third level education.

(AQW 2196/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) has provided information on the financial assistance provided by each Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) to looked after children who wish to undertake third level education; it is set out in the table below. The HSCB is currently undertaking a regional exercise, the aim of which is to establish a consistent approach to providing financial support to looked after children engaging in higher education across all HSCT areas. This exercise is intended to report by the end of 2011.

Trust	Student Fees	Student Loan	Maintenance Grant/SSG/HE Bursary	Accommodation Costs	Weekly Maintenance including – Vacation periods	Travel	Vacation accommodation	Other
Belfast	Paid in full by Trust	NO	–	Paid in full by Trust	Paid by Trust at £64.30 per week	Contribution made by Trust	Paid by Trust	Trust assistance with purchase of books, stationery, laptop
Northern	Fees not paid by Trust, Student Loan	YES	–	Paid in full by Trust	Paid by Trust at £53.45 per week (Income Support rate for 16 – 24yr)	Met in full by Trust	Paid by Trust	As above
South Eastern	Paid in full by Trust	NO	–	Paid in full by Trust	No payment by Trust	Met in full by Trust	Paid by Trust	As above
Southern	Fees not paid by Trust, Student Loan	YES	–	50% of costs met by Trust	Top ups provided by Trust based on other sources of income	Met in full by Trust	Paid by Trust	As above

Trust Western	Student Fees Fees not paid by Trust, Student Loan	Student Loan YES	Maintenance Grant/SSG/HE Bursary Maintenance Grant	Accommodation Costs Variable amount paid by Trust. Amount paid by Trust based on calculation of income and costs. Deficit in accommodation and maintenance met by Trust	Weekly Maintenance including – Vacation periods Variable amount paid by Trust based on calculation of income and costs	Travel Met in full by Trust	Vacation accommodation Paid by Trust	Other Trust reimburses cost of books and equipment
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Nursing and Care Homes: Accident and Emergency Referrals

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of accident and emergency referrals from nursing and care homes within the Northern Health and Social Care Trust in each of the last three financial years; and (ii) how many of these referrals could have been dealt with by a GP, if one was available.

(AQW 2200/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) Information on the number of referrals from nursing and care homes to the four emergency care departments within the Northern HSC Trust for the last three financial years is not currently available. However, information is available on the number of patients aged 65 & over referred from nursing and residential homes to both Antrim Area and Causeway emergency care departments for the last 18 months.

During 2010/11, 2,774 patients aged 65 & over were referred to Antrim Area and Causeway emergency care departments by nursing and residential homes, with a further 975 patients being referred between April and August 2011.

- (ii) Information on the number of these referrals which could have been dealt with by a GP is not available.

DHSSPS: Surplus Land

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list any surplus land in the North Down area owned by his Department.

(AQW 2230/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Department does not own any surplus land in the North Down area.

Mid-Ulster Hospital: Day Procedure Operations

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number and type of day procedure operations carried out at the Mid-Ulster Hospital in (i) 2010; and (ii) 2011.

(AQW 2308/11-15)

Mr Poots: In 2009/10, there were 3,624 acute day case admissions to the Mid-Ulster Hospital where at least one procedure was carried out.

The ten most common primary procedures detailed below, account for 71.6% of the 3,624 day case admissions to the Mid-Ulster Hospital during 2009/10.

Procedure	Number Carried Out
Diagnostic fiberoptic endoscopic examination of upper gastrointestinal tract	870
Diagnostic endoscopic examination of colon	312
Other excision of lesion of skin	303
Simple extraction of tooth	263
Diagnostic endoscopic examination of lower bowel using fiberoptic sigmoidoscope	248
Blood withdrawal	226
Diagnostic endoscopic examination of uterus	108
Other vaginal operations on uterus	99

Procedure	Number Carried Out
Endoscopic extirpation of lesion of colon	91
Release of entrapment of peripheral nerve at wrist	76

Source: Hospital Inpatient System

In 2010/11^P, there were 4,392 acute day case admissions to the Mid-Ulster Hospital where at least one procedure was carried out.

The ten most common primary procedures detailed below, account for 72.0% of the 4,392 day case admissions to the Mid-Ulster Hospital during 2010/11^P.

Procedure	Number Carried Out
Diagnostic fibreoptic endoscopic examination of upper gastrointestinal tract	1,054
Simple extraction of tooth	515
Diagnostic endoscopic examination of colon	342
Other excision of lesion of skin	340
Diagnostic endoscopic examination of lower bowel using fibreoptic sigmoidoscope	217
Blood withdrawal	178
Excision of vas deferens	170
Endoscopic extirpation of lesion of colon	134
Prosthesis of lens	124
Other intravenous injection	89

Source: Hospital Inpatient System

^P Information for 2010/11 is provisional and may be subject to changes.

Mood and Anxiety Disorders

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action his Department is taking to reduce the number of people with mood and anxiety disorders in the East Antrim area.

(AQW 2317/11-15)

Mr Poots: Most people with mood and anxiety disorders are seen by Primary Care who have access to services such as computerised Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), anxiety management groups and counselling services.

Within Northern Trust Mental Health Services, there are 8 Community Mental Health Teams for adults, 6 Community teams for older people with mental health problems, a CBT service and a psychology service. These teams all provide services for mood and anxiety disorders as part of the Trust's overall mental health services.

Work is also being done to reduce the number of people with mood and anxiety disorder through the Public Health Agency, such as through the Protect Life Strategy work and Community Development projects promoting good mental health..

Dementia Strategy

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) what is the status of the Dementia Strategy; and (ii) whether a cost/benefit analysis has been conducted.

(AQW 2324/11-15)

Mr Poots: Dementia care is an important issue facing us all in Northern Ireland. The expected increases in numbers of people with dementia will bring further pressures on our health and social care services.

Recognising these pressures my Department has developed and consulted on a regional strategy for improving dementia services. Given the current financial climate, I am giving careful consideration to realistic and meaningful options to progress implementation of the strategy. I hope to make a statement to the Assembly regarding this matter in the near future.

Consideration was given throughout the development of this strategy to the benefits achievable for those with dementia in respect of early diagnosis, specialist treatments, and specialist care, support and advice to the person, their carers and family. This allowed for analysis of the longer term efficiencies deliverable and the costs to implement the necessary service enhancements.

Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the land owned by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust in the Ballymena Borough Council area, including (i) the address; (ii) the size in acres of each site; and (iii) what each site is used for.

(AQW 2336/11-15)

Mr Poots: Northern Health and Social Care Trust owns two sites in the Ballymena Borough Council Area which comprise both land and buildings as detailed in the table below.

Facility Description	Address 1	Address 2	Site area (acres)
Ballee Childrens' Home	5a Hollybank Park	Ballymena	2.07
Braid Valley Hospital	52 Cushendall Road	Ballymena	6.47

Community Information System

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many administration staff will be recruited to implement the new Community Information System; and (ii) how this relates to the policy to redirect more resources to front-line staff.

(AQW 2340/11-15)

Mr Poots: There will be 11 administrative staff with service background and knowledge directly involved in the deployment of the Community Information System.

The application assists front line staff to deliver a better level of service to the patients and clients of Belfast Trust. The staff that are used in the implementation of this application are directly enhancing the resources, efficiency and information provided to front line staff.

Early Years (0-6) Strategy

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions his Department has had with the Department of Education in relation to the implementation of the Early Years (0-6) Strategy.

(AQW 2347/11-15)

Mr Poots: As the Department for Education has yet to finalise the Early Years (0-6) Strategy my Department has not held any discussions with that Department regarding its implementation directly.

My Department continues to contribute to the development of the strategy through representation on the Stakeholder Advisory Group established and led by the Department for Education.

I have met with the Department of Education Minister to discuss how we can act collaboratively on a range of issues including early years. I intend to schedule another of these meetings shortly.

Children: Dentists

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children were registered with (i) an NHS dentist; and (ii) a private dentist in each of the last ten years.

(AQW 2396/11-15)

Mr Poots: The number of children, 0 – 17 years of age, registered with a Health Service dentist in each of the last ten years is shown in table 1 below. The count of registrations is taken at September of each year.

TABLE 1: REGISTRATIONS WITH A HEALTH SERVICE DENTIST FOR CHILDREN AGED 0-17 YEARS.

Year	Number of children registered
2002	284,230
2003	280,226
2004	274,364
2005	270,903
2006	271,147
2007	266,203
2008	267,956
2009	274,790
2010	279,145
2011	314,509

Source: Family Practitioner Services, Information and Registration Unit - HSC Business Services Organisation

The information is not available as registration information for private dentists is not held centrally.

Registered NHS Dentists

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of registered NHS dentists in each of the last ten years.

(AQW 2398/11-15)

Mr Poots: The number of dentists registered to provide Health Service treatment in each of the last eight years is shown in table 1 below. Figures for the last ten years are not available; the earliest available figures are from October 2004.

It should be noted that Oasis and Salaried dentists have been included in Business Service Organisation records from 2010 onward, and this has resulted in an increase in the number of dentists compared to previous years.

TABLE 1: REGISTRATIONS WITH A HEALTH SERVICE DENTIST FOR CHILDREN AGED 0-17 YEARS.

Date	Number of dentists¹
October 2004	732
September 2005	778
September 2006	837
September 2007	852
September 2008	894
September 2009	889
September 2010	984
September 2011	1,033

Source: Family Practitioner Services, Information and Registration Unit - HSC Business Services Organisation

Notes:

- 1 Dentist numbers for 2004 - 2009 include principals, associates, assistants and trainees. Dentist numbers for 2010 and 2011 include principals, associates, assistants, trainees, Oasis and salaried dentists.

Causeway Area Hospital: Admissions

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total number of in-patients admitted to the Causeway Area Hospital in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2453/11-15)

Mr Poots: The number of inpatient and day case admissions to Causeway Area Hospital in each of the last five years is shown in the table below.

Financial Year	Day Cases	Inpatients	Total Admissions
2006/07	6,204	12,596	18,800
2007/08	6,713	13,952	20,665
2008/09	7,332	14,236	21,568
2009/10	7,497	13,959	21,456
2010/11	7,399	13,837	21,236

Source:- KH03a & Hospital Inpatient System (HIS)

Notes

- A Day case admission is defined as a patient who is admitted electively during the course of a day with the intention of receiving care who does not require the use of a hospital bed overnight and who returns home as scheduled. Regular day and night attendances are also classified as a day case admission.
- An inpatient admission includes both (a) patients admitted electively with the expectation that they will remain in hospital for at least one night, and (b) non-elective admissions (e.g. emergency admissions). A patient who is admitted with this intention but who leaves hospital for any reason without staying overnight is still counted as an inpatient.

Brendan Lillis

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) what representations his Department made to the Minister of Justice in relation to Brendan Lillis being considered for release by the Parole Commissioners; and (ii) what information the Minister of Justice sought from his Department in relation to his medical condition and treatment.

(AQW 2573/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) I raised the matter with the Minister of Justice on the 10 August 2011 during a bi-lateral meeting. Further to this, I wrote to the Parole Commissioners on 17 August 2011 outlining the scale of the treatment available to Mr Lillis and wrote to the Minister of Justice on 26 August 2011 seeking details of any healthcare advice provided in the report to the Parole Commissioners for NI, when they were considering their decision to release Mr Lillis.
- (ii) No specific information on the medical condition and treatment of Mr Lillis was requested from my Department by the Minister of Justice.

Department of Justice

Rioting Offences Over the 12 July 2011 Period

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the current total of legal aid payments made in relation to the rioting offences which occurred over the 12 July 2011 period, broken down by court division.

(AQW 1827/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): To date, only one claim for fees has been received in respect of representation at the Magistrates' Court. This claim has not yet been assessed.

The total paid to date with regard to Green Form/Police and Criminal Evidence (PACE) payments is £1,357.29 (including VAT of £201.09). A breakdown of payments by court division is not readily available at this stage.

Justice Legislation

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what new legislation he intends to introduce over the next four years.
(AQW 1841/11-15)

Mr Ford: I will shortly bring forward proposals for a Bill to change our laws on fingerprint and DNA sample retention and to improve the notification and review requirements for sex offenders. I will then bring forward a more wide ranging Bill to speed up and improve the efficiency of the justice process, provide better services to victims, and to tackle particular types of offending.

It is also my intention to improve the law on how people with mental illness are dealt with in the justice system reflecting and preferably in conjunction with legislative changes being made by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in light of the Bamford Review.

I will also be considering how I might legislate for a number of major policy reviews currently underway or which have recently reported. These include the Prisons Review, the Youth Justice Review, the Access to Justice Review and the Community Safety Strategy. I will also be considering how best to deliver tribunal reform.

The Northern Ireland Law Commission will be producing proposals for new bail legislation which I will be considering in due course. The outworkings of the Law Commission's work programme may also require other legislative work in due course just as I would anticipate that other legislative requirements will emerge over the next four years.

Jose Ignacio de Juana Chaos

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice what is the total legal aid cost to date for Jose Ignacio de Juana Chaos.

(AQW 1889/11-15)

Mr Ford: To date, the solicitor's legal aid costs paid in respect of legal representation for José Ignacio de Juana Chaos are £21,980.53 (including VAT of £2,829.15 and disbursements of £2,984.82).

It is anticipated that costs for Junior Counsel will be £18,169.03 (including VAT of £2,706.03), and costs for Senior Counsel to be £24,197.95 (including VAT of £3,603.95).

Legal Aid: Lawyers' Strike

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice what resolutions were reached which led to the end of the lawyers' strike over legal aid rates.

(AQW 1890/11-15)

Mr Ford: Members of the legal profession who had come off record from the middle of April onwards decided to resume representing their clients on the basis of the new fees agreed to by the Assembly in the Legal Aid for Crown Court Proceedings (Costs) (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2011 (the "2011 Rules"). These new fees are expected to reduce spending on criminal legal aid by approximately £18m each year.

During discussions with officials from the Courts and Tribunals Service in August, representatives of the legal profession identified a number of anomalies relating to the operation of the 2011 Rules. Arising from these discussions, I decided that new fees should be introduced for Proceeds of Crime and Confiscation hearings. I have also agreed to create a new category of fee for certain applications to the court in respect of sexual and other offences, to be known as Public Protection Applications. The cost of addressing these anomalies is estimated to be less than £15,000 each year.

I have also undertaken that my officials will keep the general operation of the Rules under review on a continuing basis.

Public Services Training College

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Justice the extent to which suppliers within the Mid-Ulster and South Tyrone areas will be employed in the construction of the joint training college at Desertcreat.

(AQW 1892/11-15)

Mr Ford: Until approval is obtained and the procurement process completed, it is impossible to determine the extent to which local suppliers will be employed in the construction of the college. However, my Department intends to do everything within legal parameters, to benefit local firms and professional staff.

Public Services Training College

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Justice the extent to which firms and professional staff from the Mid-Ulster and South Tyrone areas will be employed in the construction of the joint training college at Desertcreat.

(AQW 1893/11-15)

Mr Ford: Until procurement process is completed, it is impossible to determine the extent to which local firms and professional staff will be employed in the construction of the college. However, my Department intends to do everything within legal parameters, to benefit local firms and professional staff.

Public Services Training College

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Justice the extent to which firms and professional staff from the Mid Ulster and South Tyrone areas will be employed in the care and maintenance of the completed joint training college at Desertcreat.

(AQW 1894/11-15)

Mr Ford: There are a number of potential contracts to be let in association with the new college that will require new posts, including ICT and facilities management. Given that the contracts will be subject to procurement and legal regulations, it is not possible at this stage to determine the extent to which local firms and professional staff will be employed in the care and maintenance of the completed college. However, my Department intends to do everything within legal parameters, to benefit local firms and professional staff.

Public Services Training College

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Justice for an estimate of the number of construction jobs that will be created by the building of the joint training college at Desertcreat.

(AQW 1895/11-15)

Mr Ford: My Department estimates that throughout the life of the construction project there will be a requirement for between 1,500 and 1,700 construction jobs.

Part-time Reserve Gratuity Scheme

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice how many late applications were received for the Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme.

(AQW 1910/11-15)

Mr Ford: There have been 32 late applications received.

Sentences for Civil Unrest and Riotous Behaviour

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what plans he has to increase sentences for civil unrest and riotous behaviour.

(AQW 1913/11-15)

Mr Ford: The offence of riot was considered in the review of the sentencing framework legislated for in the Criminal Justice (NI) Order 2008 which introduced public protection sentences. Riot was included in Schedules 1 and 2 of the Order as a specified violent offence and so can attract an indeterminate or extended public protection sentence. Under common law in Northern Ireland, the maximum sentence available for riot is life. Sentencing decisions, within the legislative framework, are a matter for the judiciary, taking account of all the factors pertaining in individual cases.

Last year, I issued a consultation which considered a range of potential mechanisms by which greater transparency, consistency and understanding of sentencing practice might be achieved. I hope to announce proposals later in the autumn on how best these might be delivered in a way that will promote public confidence.

Suspended Sentences

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Justice what steps he will take to ensure that an offender with five suspended sentences, who is found guilty of a violent crime, will not receive a sixth suspended sentence rather than having the previous suspended sentences activated.

(AQW 1950/11-15)

Mr Ford: Sentencing decisions are a matter for the judiciary, taking account of all considerations relevant in individual cases. In taking such decisions, judges take account of a number of factors: the seriousness of the offence; the circumstances of the offender; the protection of the public; the impact on the victim and any aggravating and mitigating factors.

Last year, I issued a consultation which considered a range of potential mechanisms by which greater transparency, consistency and understanding of sentencing practice might be achieved. I hope to announce proposals later in the autumn on how best these might be delivered in a way that will promote public confidence.

Suspended Sentences

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Justice the number of occasions in the past twelve months where an offender has received a sixth suspended sentence rather than having any of the previous suspended sentences activated.

(AQW 1951/11-15)

Mr Ford: The information requested is not available. Court conviction and sentencing datasets and the measures of reconviction rates mentioned by the Department are not collated in the format which would allow for identification of previous disposals in the manner requested.

Suspended Sentences

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Justice to outline the circumstances in which an offender with five suspended sentences would receive a sixth suspended sentence, rather than having the previous suspended sentences activated.

(AQW 1952/11-15)

Mr Ford: Sentencing decisions are a matter for the judiciary, taking account of all considerations relevant in individual cases. In taking such decisions, judges take account of a number of factors: the seriousness of the offence; the circumstances of the offender; the protection of the public; the impact on the victim and any aggravating and mitigating factors.

Last year, I issued a consultation which considered a range of potential mechanisms by which greater transparency, consistency and understanding of sentencing practice might be achieved. I hope to announce proposals later in the autumn on how best these might be delivered in a way that will promote public confidence.

Child Abuse: Information on Abusers

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how he will impose the law for priests who fail to disclose information on child abusers that is heard in Confession.

(AQW 1958/11-15)

Mr Ford: It is not a matter for the Minister of Justice to 'impose' the law. The investigation of offences and the enforcement of the law are operational matters for the PSNI. Section 5 of the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 makes it an offence not to provide information to the police in relation to relevant offences, such as child abuse, unless there is a reasonable excuse. The police are required to bring such offences to the attention of the Director of Public Prosecutions who determines whether or not the Test for Prosecution has been met. Where a prosecution is instituted it is a matter for the court or jury to decide whether or not an offence has been committed.

Part-time Reserve Gratuity Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice how many appeals against the refusal of an award under the Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme have been (i) granted; and (ii) rejected.

(AQW 2002/11-15)

Mr Ford: There are 57 applications pending Appeals Panel decisions against refusal of an award. At its first meeting the Appeals Panel identified further investigations that needed to be completed before final decisions could be made on a number of appeals. It will need to reconvene to consider further appeals as a consequence of the payments having been made. A proportion of the funds have been set aside to make payments to successful appellants.

£250,000 has been identified to cover the cost of administering the PartTime Reserve Gratuity Scheme.

Part-time Reserve Gratuity Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice how many appeals have been lodged against refusal of an award under the Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme.

(AQW 2004/11-15)

Mr Ford: There are 57 applications pending Appeals Panel decisions against refusal of an award. At its first meeting the Appeals Panel identified further investigations that needed to be completed before final decisions could be made on a number of appeals. It will need to reconvene to consider further appeals as a consequence of the payments having been made. A proportion of the funds have been set aside to make payments to successful appellants.

£250,000 has been identified to cover the cost of administering the PartTime Reserve Gratuity Scheme.

Part-time Reserve Gratuity Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice to detail the cost to date of administering the Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme.

(AQW 2005/11-15)

Mr Ford: There are 57 applications pending Appeals Panel decisions against refusal of an award. At its first meeting the Appeals Panel identified further investigations that needed to be completed before final decisions could be made on a number of appeals. It will need to reconvene to consider further appeals as a consequence of the payments having been made. A proportion of the funds have been set aside to make payments to successful appellants.

£250,000 has been identified to cover the cost of administering the PartTime Reserve Gratuity Scheme.

DOJ: Special Adviser

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice whether his Special Adviser is paid within Band A or Band B of the Department of Finance and Personnel's salary scale; and, if it is within Band B whether, in light of the DFP decision to increase the upper limit of the Band B scale to £90,000, there has been an increase in salary or an increase is planned.

(AQW 2040/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department of Justice Special Adviser is paid within Band B of the Department of Finance and Personnel's salary scale; and there has been no increase in salary in light of the DFP decision to increase the upper limit of the Band B scale to £90,000. The Special Adviser's salary has remained at the same level since his appointment in April 2010, and no increase is planned.

Custodial Sentences

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many custodial sentences handed down at Magistrates' Courts in each of the last two years have, on appeal, been (i) reduced; (ii) suspended; or (iii) replaced with an alternative disposal broken down by court division.

(AQW 2052/11-15)

Mr Ford: There have been more than 5,200 custodial sentences handed down at the Magistrates' Court which have been appealed. A further breakdown in the form requested is not readily available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Information on the outcome of all Magistrates' Court appeals is set out in Tables 1 to 3 below.

Prison Officers

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many prison officers are currently suspended from duty due to facing prosecution.

(AQW 2053/11-15)

Mr Ford: One Prison Officer is currently suspended from duty, pending the outcome of a prosecution case against him.

Custodial Sentences with Fines

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether he will consider introducing legislation in which fines handed down with custodial sentences remain outstanding after release, instead of the individual being subject to an immediate warrant.

(AQW 2054/11-15)

Mr Ford: In appropriate circumstances, a court has the power to impose a fine in addition to a custodial sentence without the issue of a warrant committing the person to prison forthwith. The fine would then still require to be paid.

I have a policy consultation currently underway which contains proposals to tackle the problem of fine default in Northern Ireland. Along with proposals for the direct deduction of money from earnings or benefits to clear fines, and a non-police civilian-led collection and enforcement system, the consultation contains proposals to increase the penalties for those who nevertheless default. The consultation seeks views on, amongst other proposals, an increase in the period to be served in custody for default.

Production Order

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the cost, in each of the last three years, of bringing a prisoner to court following a Production Order, broken down by court division.

(AQW 2055/11-15)

Mr Ford: The information is not available in the format requested. However, the charges levied by Prisoner Escort and Court Custody Service for prisoners involved in a civil action were as shown:

Court District	Cost per prisoner 2008/09 & 2009/10	Cost per prisoner 2010/11
Antrim	£227.00	£171.00
Armagh	£211.00	£159.00
Belfast	£196.00	£148.00
Craigavon	£189.00	£142.00
Newtownards	£214.00	£161.00
Fermanagh Tyrone	£281.00	£212.00
Londonderry	£266.00	£200.00

These costs are based on staffing for vehicles and vehicle running costs only. The reduction in costs from April 2010 is due to the appointment of Prisoner Custody Officers (PCOs) to provide this service instead of Prison Officers, and the consequent reduction in salary costs.

Drugs: Legislation

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice whether he intends to introduce tougher laws to deal with individuals selling drugs.

(AQW 2056/11-15)

Mr Ford: The legislative provisions underpinning drug offences and penalties in Northern Ireland are set out in the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, the subject matter of which (including in relation to drugs offences and penalties) is reserved.

My officials maintain links with the Home Office and the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) to ensure that I am fully informed of any plans to amend the legislation. I will continue to monitor the situation and review as necessary.

Domestic Violence Legislation

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice what measures his Department has in place to educate members of the travelling community on domestic violence legislation.

(AQW 2090/11-15)

Mr Ford: A key initiative within the current Action Plan which supports the 'Tackling Violence at Home' strategy is to engage with 'hard to reach' groups. In taking this forward a Forum, at which the travelling community will have representation, has been established and will have its inaugural meeting on 18 October 2011. The Forum will develop a plan of activities aimed at enhancing engagement of 'hard to reach' groups through the provision of dedicated information, advice, services and training on domestic and sexual violence issues.

Additionally, 'The law can help', a leaflet providing information about criminal and civil law for all victims of domestic violence and abuse, was developed and widely distributed across public places including doctors' surgeries, health centres, and hospitals.

Preliminary Enquiries

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether it is necessary for remand or sentenced prisoners to be produced in court for preliminary enquiries or could such hearings be carried out by video-link.

(AQW 2091/11-15)

Mr Ford: An individual on remand will normally be present in court for a Preliminary Inquiry (PE). There are, however, certain circumstances in which a Preliminary Inquiry may be conducted without the accused being physically present:

- where he has been transferred to a hospital for treatment for a mental disorder, the court is satisfied that he is unfit to take part in the proceedings, and he is legally represented; or
- where he is prevented from effectively participating in the proceedings by reason of his being under 18 or suffering from a mental disorder. In these circumstances, the court may allow an accused to give evidence at a Preliminary Inquiry via live link.

Preliminary Inquiries have also been held by live link in a number of cases at the direction of the District Judge (Magistrates' Courts). I understand this to be with the consent of the parties.

I intend to publish proposals for consultation on the use of video-links soon and any change to the existing arrangements will be considered in that context.

Unless it is for a separate matter for which they are being prosecuted, a sentenced prisoner will not appear for a Preliminary Inquiry.

PSNI: Operation Mazurka

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many convictions have been secured in each court division as a result of Operation Mazurka, which targeted Chinese-owned cannabis factories.

(AQW 2093/11-15)

Mr Ford: The information requested is not available. Court conviction data do not contain background information in relation to offences committed, and it is therefore not possible to give the number convicted as a result of a specific operation. If the Member would want any further information on the police operations he may wish to contact the Chief Constable.

Prison Officers

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number prison officers currently employed.

(AQW 2094/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service currently employs 1752 (full time equivalent) staff of all operational grades, of which 1017 are prison officers.

Prison Service

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Justice how much the Prison Service has paid to the Transport Training Service in each of the last five years.

(AQW 2133/11-15)

Mr Ford: In the last five years the Prison Service has paid the Transport Training Service:

Financial Year	Net amount	VAT	Amount Paid
2006-07	£ 119	£ 10	£ 129
2007-08	£ 5,343	£ 796	£ 6,139
2008-09	£ 2,172	£ 289	£ 2,461
2009-10	£ 1,627	£ 191	£ 1,818
2010-11	£ 13,639	£ 1,933	£ 15,572
Total	£ 22,900	£ 3,219	£ 26,119

Motoring Offences

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many vehicles have been seized and destroyed as a result of convictions for motoring offences in the last twelve months, broken down by court division.

(AQW 2135/11-15)

Mr Ford: The information requested is not available. Court conviction and sentencing datasets are not collated in the format which would allow for identification of disposals in the manner requested. The data records the disposal reached by the court and takes no account of any subsequent seizures or destruction orders.

Custodial Sentences

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many custodial sentences handed down by Magistrates' Courts, in each of the last three years, have been increased on appeal, broken down by court division. (AQW 2136/11-15)

Mr Ford: I would refer the Member to the reply I gave on 30 September 2011 to AQW2052/11-15. The information as requested is not readily available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Office of the Police Ombudsman: Criminal Justice Inspection

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Justice what work his Department will undertake in response to the issues raised in the recent Criminal Justice Inspection report into the Office of the Police Ombudsman. (AQW 2139/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Police Ombudsman has set out the plans he has to implement the recommendations in full. I intend to meet with him and senior officials in early October to discuss progress to date on the implementation of these plans. My Department is ready to provide support to the Office of the Police Ombudsman (OPONI) throughout the improvement process, at the end of which independent validation will be sought from CJINI that the necessary actions to address the recommendations have been successfully completed. I have also offered to provide support in any way to the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in the conduct of the appointments process for the new Police Ombudsman.

The Department has also been working in support of OPONI to develop a business case for funding and resourcing historical investigations and the case is now being given full consideration. This consideration will be given in the context of those concerns in the CJINI report being fully addressed.

DOJ: Surplus Land

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what land in the North Down area his Department has deemed surplus to requirements.

(AQW 2140/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department has no land deemed as surplus in the North Down Area.

Assault

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to clarify the difference in charges for assault occasioning actual bodily harm, common assault and grievous bodily harm.

(AQW 2165/11-15)

Mr Ford: The distinction between common assault and assault occasioning actual bodily harm (AOABH) is generally based on the degree of injury which results from the assault or battery.

Common assault is an assault or battery which may result in very minor injury. Examples might include striking at a person and making contact or even if the person striking out misses his or her aim. Tried summarily it carries a maximum penalty of 6 months' imprisonment or a level 3 (£1000) fine. On indictment it carries a maximum penalty of 2 years' imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine though this too can be tried summarily subject to the consent of the prosecution and accused with a maximum penalty of 12 months' imprisonment and/or a fine of up to £5000.

AOABH occurs when a person assaults or inflicts a battery upon another person and that assault or battery causes bodily harm to the victim. Examples might include a broken tooth, minor fractures, or multiple bruising. Tried summarily with consent it carries a maximum penalty of 12 months' imprisonment and/or a fine of up to £5000. On indictment it carries a maximum penalty of 7 years' imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine.

Grievous bodily harm (GBH) means really serious bodily harm and could include injury resulting in permanent disability or lengthy treatment and wounding which breaks the whole of the outer skin – a small cut or abrasion would not normally be sufficient. GBH itself has two separate charges available distinguished on the basis of intent - (i) wounding/inflicting GBH and (ii) wounding/causing GBH with intent to cause GBH or to resist apprehension. The former carries a maximum penalty of 7 years' imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine on indictment and 12 months' imprisonment and/or a fine of up to £5000 when dealt with summarily on consent. The latter is an indictable only offence and carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine.

These are but general descriptors of the three types of charge and there may be exceptions distinguished on the particular facts and circumstances of any individual case. It is the role of the Public Prosecution Service to select the appropriate charge following a careful assessment of the available evidence.

Prisons: Food and Drinks

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Justice to detail the cost of food and drinks supplied to prisons for consumption by (i) prisoners; and (ii) prison staff in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2183/11-15)

Mr Ford: The cost of food and drinks supplied to Northern Ireland prisons for consumption by (i) prisoners and (ii) prison staff in each of the last three financial years is set out in the table below:

Financial Year	Cost of food and drinks provided to:	
	(i) prisoners (£)	(ii) prison staff (£)
2008-09	1,556,945	110
2009-10	1,538,859	3,463
2010-11	1,524,649	2,119

Glen House

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 1560/11-15, who authorised the expenditure at Glen House; and who recommended that these items be purchased.

(AQW 2208/11-15)

Mr Ford: The expenditure was authorised by the Governing Governor of Maghaberry, supported by the Director General of the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

Legal Aid

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the criteria that has to be met to qualify for legal aid at all court levels.

(AQW 2209/11-15)

Mr Ford: Eligibility for legal aid in Northern Ireland is determined for all court levels by the application of a means test and a merits test for the legal aid appropriate to the proceedings. The criteria are set out in the Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. All applicants are subject to both tests unless the legislation states otherwise. The means and merits tests differ for each of the three types of assistance: Criminal Legal Aid, Civil Legal Aid and Assistance By Way of Representation (ABWOR).

Criminal Legal Aid

The availability of Criminal Legal Aid in Northern Ireland is currently governed by Articles 28 to 31 of the Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (NI) Order 1981 (the 1981 Order). This provides for the grant of

legal aid in a Magistrates' Court, the Crown Court and on appeal, in circumstances where the court considers the defendant to be of insufficient means to pay for legal representation and that it is in the interests of justice that legal aid be granted. The availability of criminal legal aid in the Court of Appeal and in the House of Lords is governed by sections 19 and 37 of the Criminal Appeal (Northern Ireland) Act 1980, which makes similar provisions to the 1981 Order.

The "interests of justice" are not defined in the 1981 Order, but successive Lord Chancellors have endorsed what are commonly referred to as the "Widgery criteria" which are that:

- the charge is a grave one, in the sense that the accused is in real jeopardy of losing his liberty or livelihood, or suffering serious damage to reputation;
- the charge raises a substantial question of law;
- the accused is unable to follow the proceedings and state his own case because of inadequate knowledge of English, mental illness or other mental or physical disability;
- the nature of the defence involves tracing and interviewing of witnesses, or expert cross-examination of a witness for the prosecution; or that
- legal representation is desirable in the interest of someone other than the accused, for example in a case involving a sexual offence where it would be undesirable for the accused to cross-examine the witness.

Civil Legal Aid

The means test for Civil Legal Aid is set out in Article 9 of the Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 (details attached). The merits test is set out in Article 10 of the Order and comprises two limbs as follows –

- a person shall not be given legal aid in connection with any proceedings unless he shows that he has reasonable grounds for taking, defending or being a party thereto; and
- a person may be refused legal aid if, in the particular circumstances of the case, it appears –
 - (a) unreasonable that he should receive it; or
 - (b) more appropriate that he should receive assistance by way of representation.

Court levels for which Civil Legal Aid may be granted

- the House of Lords;
- the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council;
- the High Court and the Court of Appeal;
- any County Court;
- proceedings in the Crown Court under certain sections of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002;
- some proceedings in a court of summary jurisdiction (Magistrates' Court) or Family Proceedings Court;
- the Lands Tribunal for Northern Ireland;
- the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal or the Special Immigration Appeals Commission;
- proceedings in the Enforcement of Judgments Office; or
- proceedings brought by an individual before a Proscribed Organisations Appeal Commission.

Advice By Way Of Representation (ABWOR)

The means test for 'ABWOR' is set out in Regulation 7 of the Legal Advice and Assistance Regulations (NI) 1981 (details attached) and the merits test is set out in Regulation 17(3) of the same Regulations. The merits test is as follows:

- a person applying for ABWOR must show that there are reasonable grounds for taking, defending or being a party to the proceedings to which the application relates; or
- that it is made in respect of proceedings set out in Regulation 17(3)(b)(i) to (vi).

This level of representation is mainly available for proceedings which take place in the Magistrates' Courts or Family Proceedings Court.

CIVIL FINANCIAL ELIGIBILITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Type of assistance	Financial limits
Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (Green Form) (Governed by Regulation 4 of the Legal Advice and Assistance Regulations (NI) 1981)	Disposable Income limit Lower limit £100 per week Upper limit £234 per week
	Contributions from income Table of contributions ranging from £7 to £134
	Disposable Capital limit £1,000 per annum £1,335 with 1 dependant £1,535 with 2 dependants £1,635 with 3 dependants (+ £1,000 for each additional dependant)
Assistance By Way of Representation (ABWOR)	Disposable Income limit Lower limit £100 per week Upper limit £234 per week
	Disposable Capital limit £3,000 per annum £3,335 with 1 dependant £3,535 with 2 dependants (+ £100 for each additional dependant)
	Contributions Table of contributions ranging from £7 to £134

Type of assistance	Financial limits
Civil Legal Aid	Disposable Income Lower limit £3,355 per annum Upper limit £9,937 per annum Personal injury - £10,955 per annum
	Contributions from income 1/3 of the excess or such other proportion of the excess or such other amount as may be prescribed. (Article 12(1)(a) 1981 Order)
	Disposable Capital Lower limit £3,000 Upper limit £6,750 Personal injury £8,560 per annum

Contribution calculations are set out in Rules 1-14 of Schedule 1 of the Legal Aid (Assessment of Resources) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1981.

It should be noted that these rates are a guide; the full detail of each scheme to include the various deductions, allowances and disregards, can be found within the related Regulations. Eligibility based on passported benefits may vary from scheme to scheme.

Prison Officers

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Justice why a rolling style Patton pension deal is not being considered for Prison officers as part of the pension reform.

(AQW 2260/11-15)

Mr Ford: Prison officers are part of the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (Northern Ireland). This is a statutory scheme and redundancy payments are made within the rules of the Civil Service Compensation Scheme (Northern Ireland). As I have previously indicated, a Patten-type package would not be affordable in the current economic climate.

Prisoners: Cost

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Justice to detail the cost of keeping a prisoner for (i) one year; (ii) three years; and (iii) five years.

(AQW 2268/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service does not calculate the cost per prisoner but rather the average cost per prisoner place, which is published in its Annual Report and Accounts.

Using the average cost per prisoner place for 2010-11, the costs for keeping a prisoner for (i) one year; (ii) three years; and (iii) five years are set out in the table below:

Period	1 year	3 years	5 years
Average cost of keeping a prisoner	£73,762	£221,286	£368,810

Custodial Sentences for Smuggling Cigarettes

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Justice how many custodial sentences have been handed down to people convicted of smuggling cigarettes in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2560/11-15)

Mr Ford: The information requested is not available. Court conviction and sentencing datasets do not distinguish cigarette smuggling from other evasion of duty or intent to defraud offences which would be prosecuted under the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979 and/or the Criminal Attempts and Conspiracy (Northern Ireland) Order 1983.

Department for Regional Development

Railways: Coleraine to Londonderry

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development whether as a demonstration of his commitment to the upgrading of the Coleraine to Londonderry rail line, he will commit funds in this financial year to the building of the required passing loop.

(AQW 1571/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): As there is currently no separate Economic Appraisal for a passing loop to be installed independently of the main relay work, no costings are currently available. It is therefore difficult to put an estimate of cost on such a proposal. However the expense of signalling for a passing loop would be much more cost effectively incorporated into the complete re-signalling of the entire Coleraine-Londonderry section.

I have already demonstrated my commitment to upgrading the line. My Department is providing funding of £7m to enable Translink to complete essential works on the line and £20m has been allocated to 2014/15 year to allow the main works to commence. I will continue to review options and discussions will continue about what is technically and financially feasible.

Roads: Comber to Newtownards Dual Carriageway

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development what work is planned for the Comber to Newtownards dual carriageway in this financial year; and the cost of this work.

(AQW 1801/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that information on the completed and proposed roads schemes planned for the Comber to Newtownards dual carriageway during this financial year can be found in its Spring and Autumn Reports to Ards Council. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drdni.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

Roads: Grit Boxes, Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any plans to increase the number of grit boxes in Carrickfergus this winter.

(AQW 1814/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it plans to place new grit boxes in Windsor Parade and Donegall Avenue in Whitehead, and Bradford Heights in Carrickfergus.

Footpath Resurfacing Schemes

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the footpath resurfacing schemes that are planned for Donaghadee in the next two years.

(AQW 1815/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would remind the Member that information on completed and proposed roads schemes for the current financial year can be found in Roads Service's Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drdsn.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

I can advise that the detailed budget for subsequent years has not yet been finalised and it is therefore not possible to provide details of future works programmes at this time.

DRD Surplus Land

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what land Roads Service has deemed to be surplus to requirements in the North Down constituency.

(AQW 1820/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service collates details of land for sale by its four Divisional areas rather than on a constituency basis.

However, details of land/property within the North Down area that Roads Service has declared surplus and is currently in the process of being disposed of, in accordance with the procedures laid down by the Department of Finance and Personnel's Land and Property Services, are provided in the table below.

House No	Street	Town
1	Redburn Square	Hollywood
208	Bangor Road	Hollywood
	Priory Park	Hollywood
	Cayman Cottages, Balloo Road	Bangor
265	Old Belfast Road	Bangor
	Gransha Road	Bangor
2	Green Lane	Conlig
	Hamilton Road	Bangor
81	High Street	Hollywood
49	Belfast Road	Hollywood
	Park Drive/Hamilton Road	Bangor
31a	Ashdale Crescent	Bangor
41	Marlo Heights	Bangor
1a	Robinson Road	Bangor
	Shaftesbury, Belfast Road	Bangor

Car-parking Charges

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the proposed introduction of car parking charges in town centres.

(AQW 1822/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer to my oral statement of 13 September 2011 to the Assembly, when I announced that I will not introduce new on-street car parking charges in the proposed 30 towns and cities across Northern Ireland.

Footpath Resurfacing: Millisle

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the footpath resurfacing schemes that are planned for Millisle in the next two years.

(AQW 1842/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 1815/11-15.

Street Lighting: Donaghadee

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the new street lighting schemes that are planned for Donaghadee in the next two years.

(AQW 1843/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 1815/11-15.

NI Water: Tender C071

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail why NI Water tender C071 has been further extended; and who made the decision to extend the tender.

(AQW 1866/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that C071 has been further extended as a result of a legal challenge to the tender process for the award of a replacement contract to C071. In accordance with NIW's policies, the decision to extend the contract was taken by NIW's Board of Directors and approved by the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Finance & Personnel.

Roads: Gritting and Grit Boxes

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the criteria for road gritting and the provision of grit boxes.

(AQW 1878/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the winter service policy and procedures, which set out the criteria for road gritting and the provision of grit boxes, are based on the established practice of targeting the limited resources available for this service on the busier main through routes.

As a result, Roads Service salts the main through routes that carry more than 1,500 vehicles per day. In exceptional circumstances, roads with difficult topography that carry between 1,000 and 1,500 vehicles per day, are also salted. Special consideration is given to buses, including school buses, when determining whether a road should be included in the salting schedule. For example, a 40-seat bus is counted as 40 vehicles for the purposes of identifying qualifying routes. In addition, links to small settlements containing one hundred dwellings or more, are also included in the gritting schedule.

Over the past number of years, and as a result of the severe wintry conditions which have been experienced in recent years, the gritting policy has been extended to provide enhanced communication

and secondary salting to those rural schools which have previously had to close, solely due to inaccessibility arising from the presence of ice and snow on the adjacent road network. A list of schools included in this secondary salting schedule is maintained by Roads Service's local Section Offices.

The application of this policy ensures that 28% of the total road network, which carries around 80% of traffic, is salted at an annual cost of approximately £7 million, based on the last five year average. Any extension of the schedule to cover 90% or 100% of traffic volumes would increase the cost to approximately £14 million or £28 million per annum, respectively.

Roads Service provides grit boxes and grit piles on those roads maintained by Roads Service, which do not qualify for inclusion in the gritting schedule, for use by the public on a self help basis. Grit boxes can also be provided to schools which are regularly affected by severe wintry weather. There are no limits placed on the number of grit boxes which may be provided, although they will not normally be provided within 100m of another box, with the criteria for their provision as follows:

- the location in question must be on the publically maintained road network;
- the gradient of the road in question must be over 5%;
- no reasonable alternative route shall be available; and
- the subject road attains a minimum overall score, derived using a specific formula, where points are awarded depending on road geometry, residential usage, community welfare and commercial usage.

New grit boxes will not be provided unless requested by a member of the public, who also agrees to spread the salt provided. Roads Service commits significant resources to maintaining, and regularly replenishing, approximately 4,200 grit boxes and over 39,000 grit piles provided on public roads.

Roads: Gritting

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development to clarify the policy of his Department and Roads Service on the gritting of roads and footpaths during bad weather.

(AQW 1883/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the winter service policy and procedures, which set out the criteria for the salting of roads, are based on the well established practice of targeting the limited resources available for this service on the busier main through routes.

Roads Service has no statutory obligation to salt roads, but it does earmark funds to provide a salting service with the aim of helping main road traffic to move safely and freely in wintry conditions.

Roads Service salts main through routes carrying more than 1,500 vehicles per day. In exceptional circumstances, roads with difficult topography carrying between 1,000 and 1,500 vehicles per day will also be salted. The application of this policy ensures that 28% of the total road network, which carries around 80% of traffic, is salted. In an average winter Roads Service would usually use around 50,000 tonnes of salt at a cost of around £5 million. During last year's severe weather, Roads Service used over 100,000 tonnes of salt at a cost of over £10 million.

In addition, small settlements in rural areas containing 100 dwellings or more also have salted links to roads on the main salted network and, priority "secondary" salting is provided to around 50 rural schools most affected by weather conditions. Salting may also be undertaken in urgent situations such as to provide access for the emergency services, unforeseen occurrences such as funerals or to help get fuel or feed stocks to farmers.

Arrangements are also in place to use farmers and contractors to assist with clearing snow from local roads and for the provision of approximately 4,200 salt bins and over 39,000 grit piles on public roads.

I understand that over 14% of the total amount of salt, used during last winter, was applied to local roads not on the salted network to help alleviate conditions in appropriate situations and to replenish salt bins and grit piles.

In relation to footpaths, neither Roads Service nor Councils have a statutory obligation to salt these areas, however, I do not believe it is acceptable for busy town centres to remain treacherous, for long periods, because of this legislative position. In an attempt to address this situation, Roads Service has held a series of meetings with representatives from the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers, Northern Ireland (SOLACE NI).

During the course of these meetings, a consensus was established on a number of points of principle that can be used as a starting point for negotiations between Roads Service and Councils on the removal of snow and ice from busy town centre footways, during prolonged periods of wintry weather. It is the intention that these points will form the basis of a draft agreement, which could be amended at local level to take account of individual Council preferences, and ultimately provide schedules of footways, call-out arrangements, or salt delivery arrangements for each Council area.

I would hope that such arrangements could be agreed before the winter season starts, however, each individual Council will have the final decision on whether or not it signs up to provide this service to the public.

A5: Consultants

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development how much has been spent to date on consultants for the A5 project.

(AQW 1906/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department, Roads Service has advised that at the end of August 2011, approximately £38 million has been spent on development of the A5 project. This total includes £29.8 million on the cost of professional services provided by project consultants and £2.8 million on the cost of contractors' design advice.

Road Resurfacing: Donaghadee

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what road resurfacing schemes his Department has planned for the Donaghadee area.

(AQW 1909/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 1815/11-15.

Footpath Resurfacing: Holywood

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the footpath resurfacing schemes that are planned for Holywood in the next two years.

(AQW 1911/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 1815/11-15.

Street Lighting: Millisle

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the new street lighting schemes that are planned for Millisle in the next two years.

(AQW 1912/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 1815/11-15.

Connell Street Car Park, Limavady

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development why the car parking charge in the Connell Street car park in Limavady was increased from 40p per hour to 50p per hour; and what steps have been taken to reimburse people who paid the higher charge.

(AQW 1922/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Member will be aware that new car park tariffs were introduced throughout Northern Ireland recently. Almost 130 car parks were subject to a change in tariffs and this involved the recalibration of 482 'pay and display' machines.

The new tariff in the Connell Street car park in Limavady was implemented on Monday 5 September. Unfortunately, an error occurred and the wrong tariff was applied to the 'pay and display' machines in Connell Street car park. A 20p/hour increase was applied, taking the tariff to 50p/hour, when it should have been a 10p/hour increase setting the new tariff at 40p/hour. The error was corrected on Friday 9 September.

I wish to apologise for any inconvenience the error may have caused to members of the public who used the Connell Street car park during the period from 5 - 9 September inclusive.

Roads Service has offered to issue proportionate refunds for any over payments incurred during the Monday 5 and Friday 9 September period. Anyone wishing to avail of a refund should send their parking ticket along with an explanatory letter to Roads Service's parking service provider, NSL Limited, whose address is 1st Floor, Lindsay House, 10 Callender Street, Belfast, or if further information is required, they should contact the enquiries line on 0845 603 9337.

Traffic Calming: Glencolin Estate, Belfast

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development whether there are any plans to install traffic calming measures in the Glencolin Estate, Belfast.

(AQW 1929/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service receives numerous requests for traffic calming measures. It is therefore important that they are assessed as objectively as possible, to enable decisions to be made on the basis of need and resources available. When Roads Service receives a request for the provision of traffic calming measures, officials carry out an assessment of the area in question.

Roads Service carried out an assessment of Glencolin Estate for the provision of traffic calming measures, which considered various factors, including the likely speed and volume of traffic, the previous three years' personal injury collision statistics, environmental factors, the presence of schools, playgrounds, hospitals, clinics, shops, public buildings, etc and whether or not the road in question is used as a through route.

The outcome of the assessment indicated that the Glencolin Estate does not achieve a high enough priority, when compared against many of the other sites, competing for inclusion in Roads Service Eastern Division's traffic calming programme. Therefore, given the number of requests which have been assessed and have achieved a higher priority, Roads Service currently has no plans to provide traffic calming measures in Glencolin Estate.

Railways: Coleraine to Derry

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail Translink's projected costings for the upgrade of the Coleraine to Derry railway line.

(AQW 1933/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink has advised that projected costs for this project, as detailed in the 2010 Economic Appraisal, are as per the table below:-

Cost Description	(£)
Infrastructure costs	57,602,786
Other Capital costs (including provision of temporary bus service)	5,534,577
Adjustment for Optimism Bias on Capital costs	12,607,293
Capital adjusted cost	75,744,656

The adjustment for optimism bias is in line with recommended best practice. The actual cost of any project will, of course, depend on the subsequent procurements.

Car-parking Charges

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to address the inequalities that exist in relation to his Department's car parking policy on charging, which means that motorists in some towns have to pay for parking while others in similar sized towns do not.

(AQW 1956/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: As the Member will be aware, I recently announced that I will not be introducing new on-street car parking charges in the proposed 30 towns and cities across Northern Ireland.

However, as has been the case for many years, any future introduction and review of car parking tariffs will be carried out by my Department's Roads Service. In doing so, it will take account of, amongst other things, the levels of traffic congestion and turnover of spaces to discourage all day parking, which usually tend to vary from town to town and may lead to different outcomes in similar sized towns. Any proposed changes will be consulted upon with local councils and other bodies such, as local Chambers of Commerce.

Perry Street Car Park, Dungannon

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he will review the position at Perry Street car park, Dungannon, where parking is divided into a fee paying section and a free parking section and parking bays for people with a disability are only located in the fee paying section.

(AQW 1957/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Member will be aware that my Department's Roads Service received general guidance from a local access group in relation to the positioning of disabled parking bays within car parks.

In a car park that has both pay and display parking and free car parking spaces, it is normal practice to provide the disabled spaces within the pay and display parking, due to such spaces being closer to the business centre and the car park exit/entrance. Pay and display disabled parking also ensures that there is a regular turnover of short duration disabled parking spaces within a car park.

I understand that the disabled parking spaces at Perry Street have been provided adjacent to the pay and display machine and close to the car park exit. If disabled parking bays were provided in the free area Perry Street car park, disabled people would have further to walk to the car park exit.

During parking usage surveys, disabled parking space is normally available in this car park. Roads Service has therefore no plans to alter the disabled parking provision within the car park.

Road Safety Schemes

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development what road safety schemes are planned for the North Antrim area over the next twelve months.

(AQW 1962/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that information on completed and proposed roads schemes in the North Antrim area for the current financial year can be found in its Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drdni.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

I can advise that the detailed budget for subsequent years has not yet been finalised and it is therefore not possible to provide details of future works programmes at this time.

Car-parking Charges: Quay Lane South Car Park, Enniskillen

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the reasons for the increase in car parking charges in Quay Lane South car park, Enniskillen; and what level of consultation was held or notification was put in place for users of the car park prior to the increase.

(AQW 1964/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department is required to recover the full cost of its car parking operations in line with guidance set out by the Department of Finance and Personnel and HM Treasury. However, while the cost of maintaining and operating car parking has been increasing year on year, around half of the Department's car park tariffs have remained largely unchanged, or free, over the past 12 years.

In its current Budget Savings Delivery Plans, my Department has made a commitment to increase car parking income by 15% over each of the next four budget years (2011-2015). The specific detail on how this will be achieved over this period will be given further consideration by Roads Service in its Annual Car Park Tariff Reviews. However, I can advise that car parking tariffs are structured so that the more expensive tariffs apply to car parks nearer the centre of our towns and cities. This encourages those parking all-day to use the free or less expensive car parks on the periphery, thereby freeing up the most convenient spaces for shoppers or other visitors.

I understand that the Quay Lane South car park was normally fully utilised by all-day parkers before the tariff increase which meant there were no available spaces for shoppers or visitors wishing to park in that part of the town. As part of the recent Northern Ireland wide tariff review, the Quay Lane South car park tariff was changed from the 30p per three hour tariff, to the new Enniskillen town centre hourly tariff of 40p per hour. In making this change, it was anticipated that motorists, who parked their vehicles all day within this car park, would move to take advantage of the 187 parking spaces in the Holyhill Car Park that are currently free. While the current utilisation of Quay Lane car park has reduced significantly since the new charges were introduced, this is likely to increase as more shoppers and visitors become aware of the increased availability of parking.

In relation to the level of consultation or notification of the increase for users of Quay Lane car park, I can advise that while my Department has no legislative requirement to consult on increasing existing car park and on-street tariffs, a public notice was advertised in the local press on 6 April 2011. Legislation to amend the tariffs came into effect in May 2011, while tariffs in car parks in Enniskillen were increased on 29 August 2011.

NSL Services Group

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the extent to which the work of NSL Services Group contributes to traffic management in towns such as Ballymoney, Ballymena and Ballycastle.

(AQW 1969/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that NSL Services Group (NSL) has been contracted to carry out traffic enforcement duties during the period November 2006 until October 2012.

The enforcement of parking restrictions aims to reduce the number of illegally parked vehicles on our roads. Traffic Attendants are employed to issue parking tickets or Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) to illegally parked vehicles. The work of NSL has enabled Roads Service to reduce traffic congestion, improve road safety and enhance accessibility for all road users, including Blue Badge holders.

The towns of Ballymena, Ballycastle and Ballymoney have also benefited commercially from the work of NSL, as the resultant greater turnover of parking spaces in each respective commercial centre has provided the public with improved levels of access to businesses.

Roads: Grit Boxes

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any plans he has to increase the number of grit boxes in (i) the Banbridge District Council area; and (ii) the Craigavon Borough Council area in preparation for winter.

(AQW 1987/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it currently has no plans to increase the number of grit boxes in Banbridge and Craigavon Council areas. Requests for additional grit boxes are dealt with on an ongoing basis and each request is assessed against the relevant criteria.

Footpath Resurfacing: Banbridge and Craigavon

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister for Regional Development what footpath resurfacing schemes are planned for (i) the Banbridge District Council area; and (ii) the Craigavon Borough Council area in each of the next three years.

(AQW 1988/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that information on completed and proposed roads schemes in the Banbridge District Council and Craigavon Borough Council areas for the current financial year can be found in its Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drndi.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformatiotype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

I can advise that the detailed budget for subsequent years has not yet been finalised and it is therefore not possible to provide details of future works programmes at this time.

Car-parking Charges

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he expects off-street parking charges in (i) the Banbridge District Council area; and (ii) the Craigavon Borough Council area to increase following his statement to the Assembly on 13 September 2011.

(AQW 1989/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My decision not to introduce on-street parking charges to our regional towns during this difficult economic time will benefit local traders. However, as I advised in my statement on 13 September 2011, this decision will result in a funding gap of some £8.8 million within my Department. To offset part of this shortfall and protect frontline services, an additional £2.1 million of income must be generated from off-street parking charges in regional towns.

Therefore, I anticipate that off-street parking charges will increase in all local council areas, including Banbridge and Craigavon, over the course of this budget period. However, the resultant impact will be less than if the original proposal to implement on-street charging had been progressed.

DRD: Arm's-length Bodies

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost to his Department of its arm's-length bodies in each of the last two years.

(AQW 1992/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Department's arm's length bodies are Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHC) and Northern Ireland Water (NIW). The cost to my Department is as detailed in the table below.

Arms Length Body	Total value of grants/ subsidy paid by Department		Dividend and Interest Income		Loans Notes		Cost of governance mechanisms within the Department	
	2010-11 £'m	2009-10 ¹ £'m	2010-11 £'m	2009-10 £'m	2010-11 £'m	2009-10 £'m	2010-11 £'m	2009-10 ¹ £'m
NITHC								
Resource	75.5	72.7					0.43	0.43
Capital	60.9	49.9	-	-	-	-	-	-
NIW								
Resource ²	263.12	257.78	(71.3)	(61.9)			1.27	1.29
Capital ²	-	-	-	-	110	170	-	-

Notes

- 1 To allow for consistency the 2009-10 figures included in the table above exclude cost of capital. This accounting policy was no longer applied from 1 April 2010.
- 2 The figures in the table above reflect the outturn position against the net voted position. The Department's public expenditure budget (2009-10 Resource £192.7m Capital £254.3m, 2010-11 Resource £198.2m Capital £158.5m) differs from the figures quoted above as it includes all of NIW's resource and capital expenditure.
- 3 Cost of governance mechanisms is an estimate of staff time.

Road Signs: Graffiti

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development how many instances of graffiti on road signs have been reported in (i) the West Tyrone area; and (ii) Northern Ireland in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1993/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service does not hold information in the form requested, as all instances of graffiti are categorised and recorded in the same manner and therefore it is not possible to provide of a specific break down of those involving road signs.

However, local officials estimate that in the West Tyrone area, there is an average of around 1 incident a year.

Road Signs

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) what Roads Service policy is on the use of the name Londonderry on roads signs; (ii) whether he is aware of significant vandalism on road signs which feature the name Londonderry; (iii) the estimated cost of repairing one of these vandalised roads signs; and (iv) the total number and cost of these road signs repaired in each of the last five years.

(AQW 1994/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it uses Ordinance Survey mapping references as a guide to determine the names and spelling of destinations used in the design of direction signage. It is Roads Service practice to use the full place name of any destination on a sign and for this reason, 'Londonderry' is always used on direction signs for the city.

Roads Service is aware of vandalism on some road signs which feature the name Londonderry and it estimates that this problem occurs 12 times per year, within its Western Division alone.

With regard to the cost of removing graffiti from road signs, I can advise the Member that these costs are low as it is usually combined with other maintenance activities. Roads Service estimates that the cost of repair, in the area covered by its Western Division, is £50 per sign.

In relation to the total number and cost of repairing vandalised signs, Roads Service has advised that this information is not recorded separately, as it is normally combined with information on other maintenance activities. However, it has been estimated that within its Western Division, this problem has occurred on 60 occasions in the last five years, at an approximate annual cost of £600.

Street Lighting: Banbridge and Craigavon

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development what new street lighting schemes are planned for (i) the Banbridge District Council area; and (ii) the Craigavon Borough Council area in each of the next two years.

(AQW 2007/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that information on completed and proposed roads schemes, including street lighting schemes, in the Banbridge District Council and Craigavon Borough Council areas for the current financial year can be found in its Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drndi.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

I can advise that the detailed budget for subsequent years has not yet been finalised and it is therefore not possible to provide details of future works programmes at this time.

Roads: Gritting

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development what preparations he has made to ensure that roads in (i) the Banbridge District Council area; and (ii) the Craigavon Borough Council area will be adequately gritted during the winter months.

(AQW 2009/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has in place sufficient finance, labour and materials to satisfactorily carry out the Winter Service programme for the incoming winter season of 2011/12.

Although Roads Service has no statutory obligation to salt roads, it does earmark funds with the aim of helping main road traffic to move safely and freely in wintry conditions, through the removal of snow and gritting of the salted network across Northern Ireland.

Roads Service undertakes a significant amount of pre-planning to ensure a state of readiness prior to the start of each winter service season. As well carrying out a number of routine pre-season checks, arrangements are in place to ensure that adequate staffing arrangements are in place, including training for new staff, where required, there is an adequate supply of salt and winter service equipment is in working order.

It is Roads Service's policy to salt main through routes carrying more than 1,500 vehicles per day and other busy through routes which are hilly and carrying more than 1,000 vehicles per day. In applying the criteria, buses get a high weighting. For example, a 40 seater bus is counted as 40 vehicles. This policy

results in the provision of a salted network of approximately 7,000 km (4,300 miles) covering 28% of roads in Northern Ireland, and ensures that Roads Service's resources are targeted at the busier routes carrying most traffic.

Efforts are also made to ensure that small settlements of more than 100 dwellings have a treated link to the salted network and consideration is given to placing grit piles or salt bins at hills, bends or junctions on roads which are not salted.

In addition, Roads Service has introduced improvements to its operational response around rural schools regularly affected by adverse weather conditions. These improvements have ensured better communications between Roads Service and schools which experience difficulties and has allowed Roads Service to provide a more flexible and timely response as and when road conditions necessitate.

Whilst it is never possible to completely counteract the full forces of nature, based on the information currently available, I am confident that Roads Service is well prepared to deal with the incoming winter season.

Traffic Calming: Banbridge and Craigavon

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development what traffic calming measures are planned for (i) the Banbridge District Council area; and (ii) the Craigavon Borough Council area in each of the next two years.

(AQW 2011/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 2007/11-15.

DRD: Special Adviser

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Special Adviser is paid within Band A or Band B of the Department of Finance and Personnel's salary scale; and, if it is within Band B whether, in light of the DFP decision to increase the upper limit of the Band B scale to £90,000, there has been an increase in salary or an increase is planned.

(AQW 2041/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Special Adviser is paid within Special Adviser Pay Band B.

There is no annual pay progression in respect of Special Advisers' remuneration over the period 1 April 2010-31 March 2012, consistent with the freeze on any base pay award in respect of Senior Civil Service remuneration over this period.

My Special Adviser's salary has not increased since his appointment to the post on 8 June 2011. At present, there are no plans to review his salary before 31 March 2012.

Road Lighting: Ards

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any road lighting schemes planned for the Ards Borough Council area in the next four years, including the wards in which they will take place.

(AQW 2061/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it does not record information on proposed street lighting schemes by ward area. However, information on completed and proposed street lighting schemes for the current financial year can be found in Roads Service's Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drdsn.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

I can advise that the detailed budget for subsequent years has not yet been finalised and it is therefore not possible to provide details of future works programmes at this time.

Road Lighting: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any road lighting schemes planned for the North Down Borough Council area in the next four years, including the wards in which they will take place.

(AQW 2064/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 2061/11-15.

Roads: Gritting

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Regional Development, in light of the difficulties experienced by producers and suppliers in Newry and Armagh in the transporting of fresh food produce as a result of the treacherous road conditions last winter; if he will ensure that these key urban and rural routes within the constituency are gritted regularly to avoid a negative impact on the local economy.

(AQW 2066/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has in place sufficient finance, labour and materials to satisfactorily carry out the Winter Service programme for the incoming winter season of 2011/12.

Although Roads Service has no statutory obligation to salt roads, it does earmark funds to provide a salting service with the aim of helping main road traffic to move safely and freely in wintry conditions, through the removal of snow and the gritting of the salted network across Northern Ireland.

Prior to the start of each winter service season, Roads Service undertakes a significant amount of pre-planning to ensure a state of readiness for the coming winter. As well as a number of routine pre-season checks, planning incorporates ensuring that adequate staffing arrangements are in place, including training for new staff, where required, there is an adequate supply of salt and winter service equipment is in working order.

It is Roads Service's policy to salt main through routes carrying more than 1,500 vehicles per day and other busy through routes, where there are difficult circumstances such as steep hills, carrying more than 1,000 vehicles per day. In applying the criteria, buses get a high weighting. For example, a 40 seater bus is counted as 40 vehicles. This policy results in the provision of a salted network of approximately 7,000 km (4,300 miles) covering 28% of roads in Northern Ireland, targeting Roads Service's resources to the busier routes carrying most traffic.

In addition, small settlements in rural areas containing 100 dwellings or more also have salted links to roads on the main salted network and, priority "secondary" salting is provided to around 50 rural schools most affected by weather conditions. Salting may also be undertaken in urgent situations such as to provide access for the emergency services, unforeseen occurrences such as funerals or to help get fuel or feed stocks to farmers.

Arrangements are also in place to use farmers and contractors to assist with clearing snow from local roads and, for the provision of approximately 4,200 salt bins and over 39,000 grit piles on public roads throughout Northern Ireland.

I understand that over 14% of the total amount of salt, used during last winter, was applied to local roads not on the salted network to help alleviate conditions in appropriate situations and to replenish salt bins and grit piles.

Whilst it is never possible to completely counteract the full forces of nature, based on the information currently available, it is my assessment that Roads Service is well prepared to deal with the incoming winter season thus minimising any adverse impacts on the local economy.

NI Water

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development what contingency plans NI Water has in place in the event of a disruption to water supply as a result of adverse weather conditions this winter. (AQW 2074/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: NIW's response to severe winter weather conditions will be based on its Major Incident Plan (MIP) which has been revised following lessons learnt from last winter. It reflects current water industry best practice and incorporates lessons learned from wider industry events. The MIP aims to provide a fully planned response to all types of emergency. NIW emergency planning also includes a range of contingency plans for specific types of event including severe weather conditions during the winter months. NIW will be testing these before the winter.

Improvements to NIW's arrangements include: staff availability and training; transport; contractors; fuel; water storage; liaison with third parties; alternative water supplies and telephone communications. In addition, NIW will be launching a winter publicity campaign to help customers prepare for the winter. This will include advice and information on lagging pipes and on dealing with burst pipes.

Following its publication on 3 March 2011, Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has been working to implement the recommendations made in the Report of the Investigations into the Freeze/Thaw incident 2010/11. These recommendations, covering communications, contingency planning, assets, governance and leadership and resilience, are intended to ensure that NIW is better prepared to handle the effects of severe weather conditions similar to those experienced last Christmas. NIW currently plans to have approximately 90% of the short/medium term recommendations complete by December 2011, with the final 10% being completed by June 2012. There are a further ten actions that are of a long term nature and will be completed by 2015.

Water Mains

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the percentage of watermains made from each type of material; and (ii) the proportion of pipes of each type of material which burst during last winters' severe weather.

(AQW 2075/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the information requested is as set out in the table below.

Type of Material	(i) Percentage of Watermains by Type	(ii) Percentage of Bursts by Type
Asbestos Cement	6	4.5
Cast Iron	8	45
Ductile Iron	11	2
Polyethelyne	21	5
PVC	43	17
Spun Iron	10	25.5
Other & Unknown	1	1

Safe Routes to School Initiative

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the schools in each constituency involved in the safe routes to school initiative (a) prior to the 2011/12 financial year; (b) in the current financial year; and (ii) schools on the waiting list.

(AQW 2078/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Safer Routes to Schools Initiative (SRS) aims to encourage parents, children and teachers to use sustainable modes of travel for the “School Run”. Since the inception of the SRS initiative in 2005 233 schools have benefited from a range of physical infrastructure improvements as well as classroom based awareness resources. My Department’s Roads Service aims to have implemented a further 42 schemes by the end of the 2011/12 financial year.

1a) The schools in each constituency prior to the 2011/12 financial year are shown in Table 1

TABLE 1- NUMBER OF SCHOOLS INVOLVED IN SRS PRIOR TO 2011/12

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of schools
Belfast North	7
Belfast East	7
Belfast South	9
Belfast West	9
East Antrim	9
North Antrim	14
South Antrim	13
Lagan Valley	13
North Down	12
South Down	14
Foyle	14
East Londonderry	14
Strangford	12
Newry and Armagh	14
Upper Bann	12
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	25
West Tyrone	13
Mid-Ulster	22

1b) The schools in each constituency in the current financial year are shown in Table 2

TABLE 2 - NUMBER OF SCHOOLS INVOLVED IN SRS IN 2011/12

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of schools
Belfast North	3
Belfast East	2

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of schools
Belfast South	0
Belfast West	0
East Antrim	3
North Antrim	3
South Antrim	2
Lagan Valley	2
North Down	3
South Down	2
Foyle	2
East Londonderry	2
Strangford	3
Newry and Armagh	2
Upper Bann	2
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	5
West Tyrone	3
Mid-Ulster	3

18 further schools were completed as part of the DARD/Sustrans Rural Safer Routes to Schools project. These were broken down into the following parliamentary constituencies.

TABLE 3 – DARD/SUSTRANS RURAL SAFER ROUTES TO SCHOOLS PROJECT

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of schools
Mid Ulster	2
North Antrim	3
South Antrim	2
East Londonderry	1
Foyle	2
Newry and Armagh	3
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	2
Upper Bann	1
West Tyrone	1
Strangford	1

2) Schools on the Waiting List

My Department's Roads Service has advised that with regard to schools on a waiting list, it currently has a list of around 410 schools that are located across its four Divisions and which cover all parliamentary constituencies.

This list contains the names of schools identified as being on the 'waiting list'. The schools have been prioritised as being potential schemes for future years, although the listing may change as further requests are received and assessments are carried out. It should be noted that a number of the schools assessed have scores indicating a low priority rating against the criteria.

The delivery programme will be dependent upon the availability of funding for this type of work in future years.

Cycle Lanes

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to increase the number of cycle lanes on roads.

(AQW 2100/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service, in the current challenging financial circumstances, is faced with the difficult task of having to allocate a finite resource to numerous competing demands. In these circumstances, it is therefore not possible to continue to fund all functions at the same level as in previous years.

However, it remains Roads Service's intention to continue to implement, in so far as available resources permit, the cycling infrastructure as set out in the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) and the Regional Transport Strategy, which will complement the existing National Cycle Network.

Cycle Lanes

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cycle lanes which currently exist in the North Down constituency.

(AQW 2104/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: You will be aware that my Department's Roads Service is committed to providing safer roads for vulnerable road users, including cyclists, by using a range of measures, such as road safety engineering, traffic calming and enhancement of the cycling network.

Details of the 15.9 km of cycle lanes (on road) and 3.96 km of cycle tracks (on footway) which currently exist in the North Down constituency are provided in the table below:

Location	Type of facility	Cycle lane (km)	Cycle track (km)
Balloo Road, Bangor	Cycle track	-	1.9
Gransha Road, Bangor	Cycle track	-	0.3
A2 Tillysburn to Holywood	Cycle lane	4.7	-
A2 Belfast Road, Bangor	Cycle lane/track	4.5	1.1
Silverbirch Road, Bangor	Cycle lane	1.9	-
Bexley Road, Bangor	Cycle lane	1.0	-
Ballycrochan Road, Bangor	Cycle lane	2.8	-
Green Road, Bangor	Cycle track	-	0.66
Abbey Street, Bangor	Cycle lane	0.5	-
Newtownards Road, Bangor	Cycle lane	0.5	-
	Totals	15.9	3.96

Roads Service's long term Target for cycling is set out in the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) and identifies a Northern Ireland wide target to quadruple the number of trips by cycle (based on 2000 figures) by the end of 2015. I am fully committed to achieving this target.

The BMTP, which aims to provide for and encourage use of public transport and greater levels of walking and cycling, can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address: www.drdni.gov.uk/bmtp. The cycling proposals are contained within Chapter 4 of the BMTP, with specific proposals for North Down within Chapter 8.

Major Emergency Response Plan

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development on what date the review of the Major Emergency Response Plan will be completed.

(AQW 2115/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The review of the Major Emergency Response Plan was completed on 26 September 2011.

Training will be provided to relevant staff on the Major Emergency Response Plan in October 2011 and it is planned to test the revised plan in November 2011.

Roads: Severe Weather

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development what advice he has received pertaining to how severe the impact of the winter weather in 2011/12 will be on our roads system compared to the winter of 2010/11.

(AQW 2138/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service fully recognises the importance of early planning as part of the outworking of its winter service programme. This is especially true given the experiences dealing with the types of severe weather encountered in Northern Ireland during recent winter seasons. Current indications from the Met Office do not suggest that we will face the extreme weather conditions that were experienced last year, however, more up-to-date forecasts will issue in due course.

To aid this planning process, Roads Service uses specialist Met Office Winter Service forecasting that provides detailed 1-5 day forecasts and warnings of winter weather. These forecasts provide good short term accurate advice, and are used for planning purposes with a relatively high degree of confidence. I understand that these forecasts form an integral part of the decision making process on when and where salting takes place, with the intention of minimising the impacts of severe weather on the Northern Ireland Roads Network.

Prior to the start of each winter service season, Roads Service carries out a significant amount of pre-planning to ensure a state of readiness for the coming winter. As well as a number of routine pre-season checks, planning includes ensuring that adequate staffing arrangements are in place, including training for new staff, where required, winter service equipment is in working order and there is an adequate stock of salt.

Salt barns, which are strategically placed in depots throughout Northern Ireland, are normally stocked to hold sufficient quantities of salt to provide the winter service programme for a full season without the need to restock. However, following last year's severe weather, Roads Service has reviewed these levels and has increased stocks significantly in order to be well prepared in the event of potential, prolonged wintry weather. If necessary, Roads Service has arrangements in place to supplement stocks of salt during the winter period.

While Roads Service targets the limited resources available for winter service on the busier main through routes, salt bins or grit piles may be provided for use by the public, on a self help basis, on other routes adopted or maintained by Roads Service, which do not qualify for inclusion onto the gritting schedule. Roads Service currently provides approximately 4,200 salt bins and 39,500 grit piles on public roads.

In addition, I have asked Roads Service to work with the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), to develop a broad framework of principles which will set out the basis of partnering arrangements between Roads Service and Councils for the removal of snow and ice from busy town centre footways, during prolonged periods of wintry weather. When finalised, it is hoped that agreements based on the broad framework can be put in place, specifically tailored for each individual council. I would hope that such arrangements could be agreed before the winter season starts, however, each individual Council will have the final decision on whether or not it signs up to provide this service to the public.

Road Safety Schemes: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what road safety schemes are planned for the North Down constituency over the next twelve months.

(AQW 2145/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would remind the Member that information on completed and proposed roads schemes for the current financial year can be found in Roads Service's Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drni.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

I can advise that the detailed budget for subsequent years has not yet been finalised and it is therefore not possible to provide details of future works programmes at this time.

Road Signs

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what repairs to roads signs are planned for the North Down constituency over the next twelve months.

(AQW 2146/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that as defective road signs are identified during cyclical safety inspections, it is not possible to describe the next 12 month's work at this stage.

Speed Bumps

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department has any evidence of speed bumps causing accidents; and to provide further details.

(AQW 2189/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that since the Road Hump Regulation (NI) 1999 was introduced, extensive research has been carried out by the Transport Research Laboratory (TRL), an independent and impartial research consultancy, into many of the concerns expressed about traffic calming measures.

The results of this research into the impact of humps are set out in the TRL report 614, titled 'Impact of Road Humps on Vehicles and Their Occupants'. This report states that trials have established that if humps are designed in accordance with the regulations, and are crossed at appropriate speeds, they should not cause traffic accidents or damage to the underside of vehicles.

Roads Service designs and implements all Traffic Calming measures in accordance with the Road Hump Regulations and has no record of any road humps causing a traffic accident.

A1, A2 and A6: Safety Barriers

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he plans to replace the existing Wire Rope Safety Barriers on the A1, A2 and A6 with a more motorcycle-friendly type of barrier.

(AQW 2192/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that when designing carriageways, it adheres to the standards set out in the Design Manual for Roads and Bridges, which is the standard for major roads in Northern Ireland as well as in England and Wales. This manual takes account of current best practice, safety, value for money and environmental considerations, as well as the current UK and European Standards.

Similarly, the current specification for the provision of safety barriers in central reservations on new and improvement works on trunk roads permits the use of any normal containment system.

This permits contractors to install any European Standard EN1317 certified system (EN1317), which includes the use of wire rope with steel posts, corrugated steel beam with steel posts or a concrete containment system. Any contracting authority failing to use EN1317 is in breach of public procurement law and risks being subject to domestic or EU infraction proceedings.

A European Road Assessment Programme position paper entitled "Barriers to change – Designing safe roads for motorcyclists", published in 2008, concluded that despite the amount of high profile coverage that wire rope barriers have attracted, the limited research available does not warrant the inference that they are more, or less, dangerous than other types of barrier available for use.

Translink Services: Fare Evasion

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Regional Development how many people have been charged with fare evasion on Translink services in each of the last three years; and how much revenue this generated.

(AQW 2204/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The table below shows how many people have been charged with fare evasion on Translink services in each of the last three years.

Calendar Year	NIR	ULSTERBUS	CITYBUS (METRO)
2008	32	4	0
2009	54	7	3
2010	25	8	1

Translink report that these cases do not generate revenue and fines are allocated to the court services.

Roads: Tourist Signage

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he is aware of a farm diversification business near Garvagh, one of a number being filmed to appear in a forthcoming television series about such businesses, and the problems this business is facing trying to get the appropriate directional brown tourist roads signage.

(AQW 2235/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it is currently considering a request from a Mr Paul Craig, Arkhill Farm, for a replacement of the existing 'white on brown' tourist signage which provides direction to 'Arkill Farm Centre'.

Mr Craig, who will be responsible for the costs of any new signage, has requested a change to the wording on the existing signage to include:-

- Arkhill Farm
- Tea Room
- Open farm and Farm Shop

The request is being considered in accordance with Roads Service Policy and Procedures Guide (RSPPG_E029) "The Signing of Tourist Attractions and Facilities, which was developed in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

DRD: Surplus Land

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what land in the North Down area his Department has deemed surplus to requirements.

(AQW 2245/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department does not collate details of land deemed surplus to requirements on a constituency basis. However, details of land/property within the North Down area that my Department's Roads Service has declared surplus to requirements and is currently in the process of being disposed of, in accordance with the procedures laid down by the Department of Finance and Personnel's Land and Property Services, are provided in the table below.

Location	Town
1 Redburn Square	Hollywood
208 Bangor Road	Hollywood
Priory Park	Hollywood
Cayman Cottages, Balloo Road	Bangor
265 Old Belfast Road	Bangor
Gransha Road	Bangor
2 Green Lane	Conlig
Hamilton Road	Bangor
81 High Street	Hollywood
49 Belfast Road	Hollywood
Park Drive/Hamilton Road	Bangor
31a Ashdale Crescent	Bangor
41 Marlo Heights	Bangor
1a Robinson Road	Bangor
Shaftesbury, Belfast Road	Bangor

In addition, I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that properties at the following locations in the North Down area, are currently considered surplus to requirements and consequently are deemed suitable for disposal in the future:

Location

- Conlig Depot
- Seaside Tavern, Hollywood (old pumping station)
- Portavo Impounding Reservoir
- Conlig Upper Impounding Reservoir
- Conlig Lower Impounding Reservoir
- Ballysallagh Upper Impounding Reservoir

- Ballysallagh Lower Impounding Reservoir
- Creightons Green Impounding Reservoir
- Whinney Hill Service Reservoir
- Ballyminetragh Old Service Reservoir, Groomsport
- Church Road Impounding Reservoir, Holywood

Street Lighting Schemes

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what new street lighting schemes are planned for Holywood over the next two financial years.

(AQW 2246/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would remind the Member that information on completed and proposed roads schemes for the current financial year can be found in Roads Service's Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drndi.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

I can advise that the detailed budget for subsequent years has not yet been finalised and it is therefore not possible to provide details of future works programmes at this time.

DRD: Personal Injury Claims

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development how many personal injury claims were made against his Department in each of the last three years because of defective footpaths in the East Londonderry area; and how much compensation was paid as a result.

(AQW 2255/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that that it does not record information on claims for compensation on a constituency basis. However, information on personal injury claims and the amount of compensation paid due to defective footpaths in the Coleraine and Limavady Section Office areas, in each of the last three financial years, is provided in the table below:

Year	Claims Received	Compensation
2008/2009	17	£12,750.00
2009/2010	14	£9,750.00
2010/2011	13	£35,400.00

It should be noted that the amount of compensation paid in any specific financial year may not necessarily relate to claims received in that year as the time delay, from the date a claim has been received to when it has been settled, may span a number of years.

NI Water

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development what action NI Water has taken to militate against the repetition of the problems that resulted from last winter's severe weather.

(AQW 2256/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Following its publication on 3 March 2011, Northern Ireland Water (NIW) has been working to implement the recommendations made in the Report of the Investigations into the Freeze/Thaw incident 2010/11. These recommendations, covering communications, contingency planning, assets, governance and leadership and resilience, are intended to ensure that NIW is better prepared to handle

the effects of severe weather conditions similar to those experienced last Christmas. NIW currently plans to have approximately 90% of the short/medium term recommendations complete by December 2011, with the final 10% being completed by June 2012. There are a further ten actions that are of a long term nature and will be completed by 2015.

NIW's response to severe winter weather conditions will be based on its Major Incident Plan (MIP) which has been revised following lessons learnt from last winter. It reflects current water industry best practice and incorporates lessons learned from wider industry events. The MIP aims to provide a fully planned response to all types of emergency. NIW emergency planning also includes a range of contingency plans for specific types of event including severe weather conditions during the winter months. NIW will be testing these before the winter.

Improvements to NIW's arrangements include: staff availability and training; transport; contractors; fuel; water storage; liaison with third parties; alternative water supplies and telephone communications. In addition, NIW will be launching a winter publicity campaign to help customers prepare for the winter. This will include advice and information on lagging pipes and on dealing with burst pipes.

Railways: Northern Corridor Railways Group

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development what consultation he has had with the Northern Corridor Railways Group over his decision to delay funding for the upgrade of the railway line between Coleraine and Londonderry.

(AQW 2257/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The decision to delay funding for the upgrade of the railway line between Coleraine and Londonderry was taken by my predecessor in February 2011.

The draft budget allocations announced in December 2010 and the actual budget announcements in January 2011 meant that the necessary funding to allow the project to proceed as planned was not available. Funding of £20 million was allocated to year 4 of the budget period (2014/15) to allow the project to start in 2014.

The draft budget figures were subject to public consultation and my Department published its own consultation paper on 13 January 2011 which all groups were invited to participate in. Officials from my Department met with the Regional Development Committee to discuss the implications of the budget outcome. I have asked officials to review options and this work is currently being pursued.

Railway: Large-scale Projects

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has considered public private partnerships to finance large-scale railway system projects.

(AQW 2258/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Economic Appraisals are submitted to my Department by Translink for all major railway projects. The appraisals assess various options for delivering the project in order to demonstrate Value for Money. The financing of large-scale railway system projects by public private partnerships is not an approach that has been considered to date. However, it is something that I would consider if Value for Money and the impact on Translink as a group of companies had been considered.

Alley-gating

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what funding, if any, is available from his Department for alley-gating.

(AQW 2259/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I should advise that my Department's Roads Service does not have responsibility for promoting or installing alleygates. Roads Service's role is to approve and facilitate the promotion of

allegating schemes by external providers, such as local councils, by making a Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) to give legal force to the restrictions on access.

Roads Service will meet the cost of making the TRO and the erection of any necessary traffic signs. However, Roads Service does not have funds allocated to its budget to enable it to contribute to the general costs associated with alleygating schemes.

Translink

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Regional Development how much money Translink has spent on the purchase of privately-owned land from farmers, where the land contained a farm crossing, in each of the last two years, broken down by constituency and the acreage of the land.

(AQW 2264/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink has advised that in the financial year 2010/11, £1,388,615.00 was spent specifically on the purchase of privately owned land.

This action resulted in the closure of 24 User Worked Crossings (UWC) and land, thus acquired, may be sold to reduce the eventual cost of closing these crossings.

The figure quoted excludes:

- Solicitor and Land Agent fees and costs;
- Project Management Costs;
- Costs of UWC Closure Works;
- Locations where only the right of way was extinguished; and
- VAT

No land purchases have been made to date in the current financial year.

Translink is unable to provide details of such acquisitions on a constituency basis or by acreage without incurring disproportionate cost and for commercial reasons.

Car Dependency Culture

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to address the culture of car dependency.

(AQW 2280/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: It is clear that current patterns of transport in Northern Ireland and the high level of dependency upon the private car are not sustainable. In order to reduce the culture of car dependency and its significant impact on our CO2 emissions, a move towards more sustainable transport choices will be required.

The current Regional Transportation Strategy published in 2002 presented a range of initiatives to improve our transportation infrastructure, promote sustainable travel and encourage the use of modes of travel other than the car. While this has resulted in increased investment the evidence suggests that car ownership has continued to rise as our population increases.

The Regional Transportation Strategy has recently been reviewed with a view to build on what has been achieved. A new approach is proposed to refocus our transport policy that concentrates on moving people and goods rather than vehicles. It also suggests a better means of prioritising transportation interventions at a time of financial constraint.

Under the Sustainable Transport Enabling Measures of the Belfast on the Move Transport Masterplan, my Department is delivering dedicated bus lanes and associated traffic management measures in Belfast city centre. These measures will improve the public transport services in the city centre and

encourage people to use these services instead of the private car. The facilities provided will also benefit walking and cycling in the city centre.

My Department is currently preparing an Outline Business Case for a pilot Belfast Rapid Transit system. Belfast Rapid Transit represents a key element in the delivery of a step change in the quality of public transport in the city. The main aim of Belfast Rapid Transit is to increase the use of public transport and reduce reliance on the private car.

Further, my Department's Travelwise Northern Ireland initiative is seeking to promote, and generally raise the awareness levels of the general public, towards more sustainable transport options including cycling, walking, greater use of public transport, as well as car sharing and park and ride facilities, in order to encourage a change in public attitudes away from the private car as the main mode of travel in Northern Ireland.

Footpath Resurfacing: Cookstown

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the footpath resurfacing or upgrade schemes planned for the Cookstown District Council area in each of the next two years.

(AQW 2303/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would remind the Member that information on completed and proposed roads schemes for the current financial year can be found in Roads Service's Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drndni.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

I can advise that the detailed budget for subsequent years has not yet been finalised and it is therefore not possible to provide details of future works programmes at this time.

Traffic Calming: Cookstown

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the traffic calming schemes planned for the Cookstown District Council area in each of the next two years.

(AQW 2304/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 2303/11-15.

Street Lighting: Cookstown

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the street lighting schemes planned for the Cookstown District Council area in each of the next two years.

(AQW 2305/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 2303/11-15.

A5: Assistance for Rural and Farm Dwellers

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development what measures her Department has put in place to assist rural and farm dwellers along the route of the proposed A5.

(AQO 408/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: It is acknowledged that the construction of any new road will impact on certain landowners and, in the case of the A5 scheme, these are predominantly rural and farm dwellers. My Department's Roads Service has had lengthy discussions with all affected landowners, with the objective of mitigating the impacts as far as is reasonably practicable. Typical mitigation measures include the provision of structures to access severed lands, low noise surfacing to reduce noise

impacts on adjacent property and, where appropriate, the use of temporary access agreements to allow shorter term control of land that may be required temporarily to facilitate construction of the works.

Where it is not possible to fully mitigate the impacts of the project, compensation is offered, which is assessed independently by the Department of Finance and Personnel's Land and Property Service.

Department for Social Development

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to assess Disability Living Allowance, following the introduction of Welfare Reform.

(AQW 1918/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I am considering a number of areas relating to welfare reform which will mirror provisions contained in the Welfare Reform Bill currently before Parliament. This includes replacing Disability Living Allowance with a new Personal Independence Payment which will support disabled people who face the greatest barriers to leading full and independent lives.

The proposals for a Personal Independence Payment are currently being consulted on as part of an Equality Impact Assessment and include-

- new assessment criteria designed to deliver more consistent outcomes and greater transparency for individuals;
- two components based on an individual's mobility needs and their ability carry out other key activities necessary to be able to participate in daily life;
- a facility to regularly review awards; and
- maintaining existing special rules to fast track claims for people who are terminally ill.

I want the assessment criteria to reflect a more complete consideration of the impact of an individual's health condition or impairment on their ability to perform everyday activities, for example, how they manage their personal care and treatment, communicate or get around.

The criteria have been tested to give a better understanding of their likely impact. Northern Ireland cases have been included in that testing. Once the findings have been evaluated the assessment criteria will be refined if necessary and published for further consideration.

Subject to completing the consultation on the proposals and Executive approval, I anticipate introducing an Assembly Bill after the corresponding Westminster Bill has received Royal Assent.

Housing: Rasharkin

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development (i) what new housing is planned for the Rasharkin area in the next three years; and (ii) to detail if he is aware of any obstacles to the proposals.

(AQW 1971/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Triangle Housing Association is preparing to build 11 units of general needs accommodation at Church Road, Rasharkin. This scheme had initially been programmed to start during 2009/10; however the scheme is now unlikely to start until 2012/13 (pending approval)

The delay is because Triangle have been unable to obtain planning approval for this site as an upgrade to the existing sewerage works is required before NI Water will allow any new connections to the system. Triangle has been unable to ascertain a date for upgrade works to commence.

The most recent Housing Need Assessment indicates that the projected social housing need for Rasharkin has declined. This reflects the reduction in Housing Stress applicants on the Social Housing Waiting List. This Housing Need Assessment is currently under review. In the short term, housing need in the area is being addressed through the turnover of existing stock.

Boiler Replacement Scheme

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development in total, how many (i) applications; and (ii) successful applications have been made to the Boiler Replacement Scheme to date, broken down by (a) constituency; and (b) council area.

(AQW 2008/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information requested is not available by constituency or council area. All potential eligible applicants have been contacted by leaflet. To date, the Housing Executive, who administer the Boiler Replacement Scheme, has approved 94 eligible applications. A further 218 successful applications are being processed. I now intend to extend the pilot scheme to another vulnerable group and from October lone householders aged 70 and over who receive Lone Pensioner Allowance and with a boiler aged 15 years or older will be eligible for the assistance from the pilot scheme.

DSD: Capital Projects

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the capital projects planned for each constituency in the next three years.

(AQW 2010/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The capital projects planned in the next three years by my Department are detailed in the following table. However, it should be noted that details in respect of Housing projects are listed by District Office Area, as the information requested is not available by constituency.

Housing			
District Office Area	Description	No of Dwellings	Year
East Antrim	Craigyhill, Larne	31	2012/13
	Taylor's Avenue, Carrickfergus	24	
East Londonderry	Sperrin Road/Rathbeg, Limavady	50	
Foyle	High Park, Londonderry	16	
	Balbane / Linsfort Londonderry	55	
Mid Ulster	Edinburgh Drive, Cookstown	31	
Newry & Armagh	Daisy Hill/O'Neill's Avenue, Newry	41	
North Antrim	Lime Park Kitchens, Ballymoney	9	
North Belfast	Abbeyville Park, Belfast	20	
North Down	Bloomfield Bungalows Phase 3, Bangor	27	
	Bloomfield Bungalows Phase 2, Bangor	45	
	Kilcooley Phase 1A, Bangor	24	
South Antrim	Grant Avenue, Antrim	8	
South Belfast	Belvoir Bedsit Flats, Belfast	32	

Housing			
District Office Area	Description	No of Dwellings	Year
South Down	South Down Kitchens	52	
Strangford	Castlereagh Rurals	3	
Upper Bann	Wellington Street, Lurgan	32	
	Abercorn/Brownstow, Craigavon	46	
	Rural Cottages, Lurgan	17	
West Tyrone	29-33 Melmount Villas, Strabane	4	
Newry & Armagh	High St/Church St, Newry	39	2013/14
	John Mitchell Street, Newry	20	
North Antrim	Granville Drive, Ballymena	19	
North Belfast	Hazeldene/Strathroy/Northwick, Belfast	33	
West Tyrone	Coalisland Kitchens	45	
	Castleberg/Sion Mills	40	
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Augher, Dungannon	22	2014/15
Foyle	Beechwood Crescent, Londonderry	40	
West Tyrone	Ardmore Coalisland	54	

Urban Regeneration - Contractually Committed Projects		
Constituency	Description	Year
East Antrim	Carrickfergus Town Centre Public Realm	Starts 2011/12- continues into 2012/13
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Public Realm Phase 1	Starts 2011/12- continues into 2012/13
Lagan Valley	Banbridge - Rathfriland St Public Realm	Starts 2011/12- continues into 2012/13 & 2013/14
Newry & Armagh	Newry - Monaghan St / Hill St Public Realm	Starts 2011/12- continues into 2012/13
	Armagh City Centre Revitalisation Project	Starts 2011/12- continues into 2012/13
	Lisburn Public Realm	Starts 2011/12- continues into 2012/13 & 2013/14
Upper Bann	19-21 High St, Lurgan	Starts 2011/12- continues into 2012/13
	Lurgan Public Realm Phase 2	Starts 2011/12- continues into 2012/13 & 2013/14
East Londonderry	Coleraine Rural & Urban Network	Starts & finishes 2012/13

Urban Regeneration - Contractually Committed Projects		
Constituency	Description	Year
Belfast East	Skainos	Started 2008/09 -continuing into 2013/14
	Connswater Community Greenway	Started 2008/09- continuing into 2014/15
	Ravenhill/Short Strand Gateway	Started 2010/11- continues into 2013/14
	Templemore School – Provision of Civic Hub	Starts 2011/12- continues into 2012/13
	East Belfast Community Development Agency	Starts & finishes 2012/13
Belfast South	Elmoreton Ltd., Donegall Road	Starts2011/12- continues into 2012/13
	St Malachys – Provision of Youth Club	Starts 2011/12- continues into 2013/14
Belfast North	Ardoyne Shops Junction	Starts2011/12- continues into 2012/13
	S P Graham, Ligoneil Road	Starts2011/12- continues into 2012/13
Belfast West	Andersonstown Road Public Realm Environmental Improvement (PREI) Scheme	Started 2009/10-continuing into 2013/14
	Colin Gateway	Started 2010/11- continues into 2013/14
	Andersonstown Roundabout PREI Scheme	Starts 2011/12- continues into 2012/13
	Laser Prototypes, Whiterock Business Park	Starts2011/12- continues into 2012/13

Urban Regeneration - Other Capital Projects (not yet contractually committed)		
Constituency	Description	Year Scheduled Date(s)
East Londonderry	Disability Action	Start date not yet agreed -possibly 2012/13 or 2013/14 completing in 2014/15
Belfast North	Girdwood Park – Infrastructure Costs for a Community Hub	2011/12 – 2012/13
	13-31 York Road acquisition	2012/13
	Sites Adjacent to Crumlin Rd Courthouse acquisition	2012/13
	Shops at Shore Crescent acquisition	2012/13
	York/Shore Road PREI Scheme	2012/13
	Clifton Street Gateway PREI Scheme	2012/13
	Oldpark Road PREI Scheme	2012/13
	JGB Developments; Derrycoole Way	2012/13

Urban Regeneration - Other Capital Projects (not yet contractually committed)		
Constituency	Description	Year Scheduled Date(s)
	HHD Solicitors; Oldpark Rd	2012/13
	Dunluce Properties; Shore Road	2012/13
	Colinward Pharmacy; Antrim Road	2012/13
Belfast South	Mencap	2012/13
	An Droichead	2012/13
	Sussex Place	2012/13
	Markets Area	2012/13
	Rainbow Developments; Donegall Pass	2012/13
	A Steele; Shaftesbury Square	2012/13
	Belfast Streets Ahead Phase 2	2014/15
Belfast West	Woodvale Park – Railings, etc.	Starting 2011/12-continues into 2012/13
	Bank Square Public Realm Scheme	2012/13
	Ballymac Friendship Trust – Provision of Community Centre	2012/13
	Twinbrook Pitches - improvements	2012/13
	Footprints Women's Centre – Kitchen Refurbishment	2012/13
	Sally Gardens Community Centre - Refurbishment	2012/13
	St Marys Christian Brothers School Glen Rd Pitches	2012/13
	St Peters Boxing Club	2012/13
	Land at Shankill Terrace acquisition	2012/13
	Land at Townsend St / Westlink acquisition	2012/13
	Shankill Rd Car Wash acquisition	2012/13
	Shankill Kentucky Fried Chicken Site acquisition	2012/13
	Vacant Land/derelict Warehouses, Distillery Street acquisition	2012/13
	Andrews Flour Mill, Falls Rd acquisition	2012/13
	Colin Town Centre - Various Acquisitions	2012/13
	Lands at Glen Rd - Various Acquisitions	2012/13
	Andersonstown Gateway - Various Sites acquisition	2012/13
	Peters Hill Gateway PREI Scheme	2012/13
	Divis Street Gateway PREI Scheme	2012/13

Urban Regeneration - Other Capital Projects (not yet contractually committed)		
Constituency	Description	Year Scheduled Date(s)
	Gaeltacht Quarter PREI Scheme	2012/13
	Dunville Park – Railings, etc.	2012/13
	Fullarrmoon Ltd., Shankill Road	2012/13
	Global Country for World Peace; Townsend St/ Peters Hill	2012/13
	Rathen Ltd; Lanark Way	2012/13
	Iontaobhas na Gaelscolaiochta (InaG); Falls/ Broadway	2012/13
	D McSherry; Suffolk Rd	2012/13
	Granite Properties; Springfield Road	2012/13
	Land at Agnes St acquisition	2013/14
Belfast East	Queens Quay	2012/13
	Connswater St / Newtownards Rd Apex site acquisition	2012/13
	1-21 Castlereagh Road acquisition	2012/13
	70 Beersbridge Road acquisition	2012/13
	Portview/Browns Mill, Newtownards Rd acquisition	2012/13
	Various Sites East Belfast Development Strategy acquisition	2012/13
	3 Stormont Lane acquisition	2012/13
	7 Mountpottinger Rd acquisition	2012/13
	269-271 Newtownards Rd acquisition	2012/13
	242-244 Newtownards Rd acquisition	2012/13
	R&K Matthews; Beersbridge Rd	2012/13
	Nigel Barr; Woodstock Road	2012/13
	Bryson Street Surgery	2012/13
	Pinnacle Properties	2012/13
Belfast West & North	Cross Community Corridor PREI Scheme	2012/13
East Antrim	Ballymena Masterplan Public Realm Programme	2013/14 - 2014/15
	Ballymena Town Centre Public Realm	2013/14 - 2014/15
	Carrickfergus ReStore	2013/14
	Ballymena ReStore	2014/15
	Larne Masterplan public realm programme	2014/15

Urban Regeneration - Other Capital Projects (not yet contractually committed)		
Constituency	Description	Year Scheduled Date(s)
East Londonderry	Milburn Community Centre Modernisation	2012/13
	Portrush Main Street ReStore	2013/14
	Portstewart Front Public Realm	2014/15
	Coleraine ReStore	2014/15
	Portstewart ReStore	2014/15
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Kilmacormick Resource Centre extension	2011/12 - 2012/13
	Enniskillen Neighbourhood Renewal Area EI capital works 11/12 (Inishkeen)	2011/12 - 2012/13
	Enniskillen West End Community Provision	2012/13
	Disabled access to lakeshore pathways	2012/13
	Enniskillen Public Realm	2012/13 - 2014/15
	Dungannon Public Realm Scheme	2012/13 - 2013/14
Lagan Valley	Dromore Revitalisation Project	2012/13
	Lisburn Bridge St ReStore Project	2014/15
Mid Ulster	Mountcairn Multi-Use Games Area	2011/12 - 2012/13
	Coalisland Enhancing Employment Prospects - continuation	2011/12 - 2012/13
	Fianna Sports Facility	2012/13
	Sandy Row EI Scheme	2012/13
	Cookstown Molesworth Street	2013/14
	Magherafelt Public Realm Scheme	2013/14
Newry & Armagh	Kilkeel - Revitalisation Project	2011/12 - 2012/13
	Newry Revitalisation Project	2012/13
	Armagh St Patricks Family Learning Centre	2012/13
	Armagh - Mullacreevie Sports changing facilities	2012/13
	Community Information & Resource Centre	2012/13
	3 Ways Community Centre Extension	2012/13
	Crèche Facilities	2012/13
	Armagh - Naoiscoil Ard Macha New Classroom etc.	2012/13
	Armagh - Drumarg Allotments	2012/13
	Newry - Derrybeg Community Centre	2012/13

Urban Regeneration - Other Capital Projects (not yet contractually committed)		
Constituency	Description	Year Scheduled Date(s)
	Armagh Harps - New Sports Facilities	2012/13
	Newry - Martins Lane External Maintenance Scheme	2012/13
	Armagh - Shop Frontage Scheme – Neighbourhood Renewal Area	2012/13
	Armagh - Soft Play Areas Drumarg and Callanbridge	2012/13
	Armagh - Soft Play Area Naiscoil Ard Mhacha	2012/13
	Newry - The Quay Public Realm	2012/13 - 2013/14
	Armagh - Community Hub - Old Parochial Hall	2013/14
	Warrenpoint - Church St	2013/14
	Newry - Town Hall Public Realm	2013/14
	Armagh – NI Housing Executive - External Improvements Scheme	2013/14
	Newry - Carnagat Enterprise Centre Site Development Study	2013/14
North Antrim	Ballee Community Centre Refurbishment	2012/13
	Ballycastle ReStore	2014/15
	Ballyclare ReStore	2014/15
	Ballymoney ReStore	2014/15
	Ballyclare Six Mile Water Public Realm	2014/15
	Ballymoney Linenhall Street Public Realm	2014/15
	Ballycastle River Path Public Realm	2014/15
North Down	Bangor - Kilcooley Allotments & Healthy Living Facility	2012/13
	Bangor – Kilcooley 3G Pitches	2012/13
	Kilcooley - Multi-Functional Centre	2013/14
	Bangor Public Realm Scheme	2013/14 - 2014/15
	Donaghadee Public Realm	2014/15
	Bangor Abbey Street Revitalisation Project	2014/15
	Hollywood Public Realm	2014/15
South Antrim	Antrim EI - High Street	2011/12 - 2012/13
	Glengormley ReStore	2012/13
	Ballyclare Rashee Road Public Realm	2013/14
	Antrim ReStore	2013/14

Urban Regeneration - Other Capital Projects (not yet contractually committed)		
Constituency	Description	Year Scheduled Date(s)
	Ballyclare Lower Main Street Public Realm	2014/15
	Glengormley Antrim Road/Antrim Line/Ballyclare Road Public Realm	2014/15
	Randalstown New Street Public Realm	2014/15
	Randalstown ReStore	2014/15
South Down	Downpatrick - Revitalisation Project	2011/12 - 2012/13
	Downpatrick - Allotments	2012/13
	Downpatrick Irish Street	2013/14
	Downpatrick – Meadowlands Walk EI Scheme	2013/14
Strangford	Ballynahinch Public Realm	2012/13 - 2013/14
	Comber Public Realm	2013/14
	Ballynahinch - Revitalisation Project	2013/14
	Newtownards Town Centre Public Realm	2013/14
	Newtownards Regent Street Revitalisation Project	2013/14
Upper Bann	St. Marys Youth Club - Phase 2	2011/12 - 2012/13
	Lurgan Rugby Football & Cricket Club - Regeneration and Improvements phase 2	2012/13
	Portadown Restore Project	2012/13
	Portadown Tunnel	2013/14
	Lurgan Public Realm Phase 3	2014/15
West Tyrone	Omagh Riverside Development - Strathroy Bridges	2011/12 - 2012/13
	Strathroy Football Pitch & Lighting	2012/13
	Omagh Public Realm Scheme	2012/13 - 2013/14

In addition to those projects listed, the Social Security Agency will incur capital expenditure to replace/upgrade the Medical Examination Centres in Dungannon, Armagh and Portadown in the financial year 2012/13. These cover the constituencies of Fermanagh & South Tyrone, Newry & Armagh and Upper Bann respectively. The Agency will also incur spend in line with its extensive Welfare Reform and Modernisation programme, which will be subject to developments in the Department of Work and Pensions, and may include the replacement of the Social Fund IT system by April 2013. This would cover all eighteen constituencies and cannot be apportioned.

It should be noted that these schemes are all subject to funding and the necessary approval processes being completed.

DSD: Arm's-length Bodies

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the cost to his Department of its arm's-length bodies in each of the last two years.

(AQW 2012/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The cost of arm's length bodies to my Department in each of the last two years was as follows:

	2009-10 £'m	2010-11 £'m
Northern Ireland Housing Executive	490.41	449.48
Charities Commission for Northern Ireland	0.36	0.83
Ilex – Urban Regeneration Company - (co-funded with OFMDFM)	1.70	2.36

Social Housing

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development what steps the Housing Executive is taking to increase the supply of social housing required over the next four years in (i) Coleraine Town; (ii) Portstewart; (iii) Portrush; (iv) Portballintrae; and (v) and Castlerock.

(AQW 2071/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that the following schemes are in the 2011/12 Social Housing Development Programme in the East Londonderry area which encompasses the areas in question:-

Hass Road, Dungiven	Tamlough Park, Ballykelly	Lerwill House, Coleraine	Mullaghacall Road, Portstewart	Parker Avenue, Portrush
10 Units	13 Units	14 Units	1 Unit	1 Unit

The Social Housing Development Programme has not yet been approved beyond 2011/12.

Boiler Replacement Scheme

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development how many householders in the East Londonderry area have applied under the Boiler Replacement Scheme to date; and of these, how many were successful.

(AQW 2072/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information requested is not available by constituency or council area. All potential eligible applicants have been contacted by leaflet. To date, the Housing Executive, who administer the Boiler Replacement Scheme, has approved 94 eligible applications. A further 218 successful applications are being processed. I now intend to extend the pilot scheme to another vulnerable group and from October lone householders aged 70 and over who receive Lone Pensioner Allowance and with a boiler aged 15 years or older will be eligible for the assistance from the pilot scheme.

Enniskillen Town Masterplan

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the Enniskillen Town Masterplan.

(AQW 2082/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department appointed the Consultancy firm URS Scott-Wilson to undertake the preparation of a Town Centre Masterplan for Enniskillen on 15 March 2010. At that time, it was anticipated that the work would take approximately one year to complete.

The terms of reference for the consultants require the consultants to consider the future use of the current Erne Hospital site, which will be vacated in 2012. During the course of the initial survey work, which has now been completed, Fermanagh District Council indicated that they wished to explore the possibility of creating a public-services hub on the Erne Hospital site. As this would have major implications for the future development of the town centre, not least in terms of the uses of the sites and buildings vacated by any relocating service providers, the Council asked my Department to pause the work on the Masterplan while it undertakes a detailed study of the public service hub proposal.

This was agreed with the Masterplan Steering Group and the consultancy team. Preparation of the final draft of the Masterplan will resume as soon as Fermanagh District Council has completed its work.

The timetable to complete the masterplan depends on when the Council's study is completed. However, the work required to complete the Masterplan, including a period of public consultation, will take approximately 6 months from that date that work resumes.

Housing Associations: Service Charges

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the guidelines used by housing associations to determine the service charges for tenants and householders who have bought their properties from the same housing association in the same area.

(AQW 2120/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Housing Associations determine service charges based on the services they provide. The Housing Association Guide requires Associations to ensure that any service charge is in reasonable proportion to the cost to the Housing Association of providing the service. The Associations are also required to inform their tenants how their service charges have been calculated.

The services can differ significantly from housing scheme to housing scheme and services may differ between tenants and householders dependant on the service provided to each.

Housing: Eligibility

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the criteria and point levels used by the Housing Executive to assess an individual's eligibility for housing; and (ii) whether he is aware of any proposed changes to the point levels.

(AQW 2131/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Rules of the Housing Selection Scheme govern access, assessment and allocation of social housing in Northern Ireland. Full details of the Scheme Rules can be found at: www.nihe.gov.uk/housing_selection_scheme_rules.pdf.

The Housing Executive recently carried out a preliminary consultation exercise on modernising certain aspects of the Scheme. Although the consultation has now closed, the full proposals can still be found at: www.nihe.gov.uk/index/sp_home/consultation/consultation_archive.htm.

Children Living in Poverty: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many children in the North Down area are living in poverty.

(AQW 2153/11-15)

Mr McCausland: During the period 2005/09, 5,000 children in North Down Westminster Parliamentary Constituency were living below the relative poverty line, equating to 22% of children. This is slightly lower than for Northern Ireland overall where 24% of children were living below the relative poverty line. The results are produced using the Family Resources Survey datasets for Northern Ireland, and the Households Below Average Income datasets for Northern Ireland.

Housing Executive: Surplus Land in North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to list any surplus land in the North Down area owned by the Housing Executive.

(AQW 2154/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The table below details land owned by the Housing Executive within their Bangor District Office area which is considered surplus.

Location	Acreage
Old Belfast Road, Bangor	0.23
South Circular Road, Bangor	1.95
Rathgill, Bangor	7.34
Ava Street, Bangor	0.13
Hillview Place, Holywood	0.02

Housing Executive Properties: Double Glazing

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of (i) housing units; and (ii) senior citizen accommodations provided by the Housing Executive which do not currently have double glazing, broken down by district.

(AQW 2157/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that their properties are allocated based on the individual applicant's circumstances (and also on the circumstances of any members of their household) and therefore they do not have a category of stock for senior citizen accommodation.

The Housing Executive has advised that 60% of their stock currently does not have double glazing.

External Cyclical Maintenance Schemes

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the External Cyclical Maintenance Schemes that are planned for the current financial year in the (i) Ballymoney Borough Council; (ii) Ballymena Borough Council; and (iii) Moyle District Council areas.

(AQW 2199/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has the following External Cyclical Maintenance schemes in their programme for the current financial year:-

Ballymoney District Office Area:-

Clintyfinnan/Rasharkin	389 dwellings	On site May 2011
Glebeside Phase	167 dwellings	Reserve scheme January 2012

Ballymena District Office Area:-

Ballee	363 dwellings	On site August 2011
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Ballycastle District Office Area

Ballintoy/Liscolman	18 dwellings	Reserve scheme January 2012
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Reserve schemes are programmed subject to adequate finance becoming available.

Alley-gating

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how much his Department has spent on alley-gating in each of the last three years.

(AQW 2239/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In the last three financial years from 2008/09 to 2010/11 my Department has spent a total of £64,685 on two alley-gating projects. Funding for both projects was awarded in 2010/11.

Alley-gating

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what level of funding is currently available for alley-gating.

(AQW 2241/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department does not have a specific budget for alleygating. Funding in the past has been made available from the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund (NRIF) for alleygates for community safety reasons.

Funding from the NRIF has been awarded, subject to available resources, following the identification and prioritisation of a need for such measures by the Neighbourhood Partnership in the area's Action Plan. This is the basis on which any future Neighbourhood Renewal funding will be considered.

Social Housing: Newbuilds, East Londonderry

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Social Development what new build projects the Housing Executive has planned for the East Londonderry area in (i) 2012; (ii) 2013; (iii) 2014; and (iv) 2015.

(AQW 2263/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that the following schemes are in the 2011/12 Social Housing Development Programme in the East Londonderry area:-

Hass Road, Dungiven	Tamlough Park, Ballykelly	Lerwill House, Coleraine	Mullaghacall Road, Portstewart	Parker Avenue, Portrush
10 Units	13 Units	14 Units	1 Unit	1 Unit

The Social Housing Development Programme has not yet been approved beyond 2011/12.

Green New Deal Housing Pilot Programme

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development if the Green New Deal Housing Pilot Programme is successful, whether he intends to fund and implement the scheme across Northern Ireland.

(AQW 2276/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department's Permanent Secretary is chairing a cross Departmental group to examine the potential of the Green New Deal for Northern Ireland. The group is working with the Green New Deal consortium to help them formalise a business plan which can inform any economic appraisal developed by the Department on the best approach to allocating the £12 million the Executive identified in support of the concept. The Green New Deal Group expects to submit a business plan by the end of September.

Boiler Replacement Scheme

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Social Development how many (i) applications; and (ii) successful applications have been made to the Boiler Replacement Scheme to date.

(AQW 2286/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Boiler Replacement Scheme is a pilot scheme targeted at owner occupiers or private tenants on low income who miss out on other Government energy efficiency improvement schemes such as the Warm Homes Scheme which is available to people who receive Housing Benefit. All potential Boiler Replacement Scheme beneficiaries have been identified and have been contacted by leaflet and this has resulted in over 300 successful applications.

I have now extended the pilot scheme to lone householders aged 70 and over who receive Lone Pensioner Allowance and have a boiler aged 15 years or older.

Housing Executive Properties

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development whether the Housing Executive intends to review its policy of not re-opening fire places in its properties.

(AQW 2288/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has carried out a draft heating policy review which is currently with my Department for approval. The review did not recommend reopening fire places because, whilst the rising cost of oil deliveries and heating fuels were considered within the review, the Housing Executive concluded that the renewed use of redundant open fires would not be a viable option. There are environmental, maintenance and funding issues which would constrain such an approach. This decision was only taken after consideration of issues such as initial and regular maintenance costs, effectiveness, ease of use, health and safety and environmental/sustainability issues. It should be noted that the Housing Executive's existing heating policy is designed to reduce carbon emissions from their properties.

Children Living in Poverty

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Social Development how many children are living below the poverty line in each constituency.

(AQW 2326/11-15)

Mr McCausland: During the period 2005/09 the number and percentage of children living below the relative poverty line for each Westminster Parliamentary Constituency is presented in Table 1. The results are produced using the Family Resources Survey datasets for Northern Ireland, and the Households Below Average Income datasets for Northern Ireland.

Table 1:

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of children in relative low income	Percentage of children in relative low income
Belfast East	..	15
Belfast North	4,800	26
Belfast South	..	9
Belfast West	8,700	34
East Antrim	5,600	29
East Londonderry	5,100	23
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	7,400	33

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of children in relative low income	Percentage of children in relative low income
Foyle	11,200	40
Lagan Valley	..	14
Mid Ulster	9,600	31
Newry and Armagh	..	25
North Antrim	5,100	21
North Down	5,000	22
South Antrim	..	18
South Down	7,900	24
Strangford	..	14
Upper Bann	5,200	21
West Tyrone	6,100	25
Northern Ireland	103,600	24

Alley-gating

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development whether he intends to increase the funding for alleygating schemes.

(AQW 2354/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department does not have a specific budget for alleygating. Funding in the past has been made available from the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund (NRIF) following the identification and prioritisation of a need for such measures by the Neighbourhood Partnership in the area's Action Plan. Subject to available resources, this is the basis on which any future Neighbourhood Renewal funding for alleygates will be considered.

Boiler Replacement Scheme

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development whether he will reconsider the criteria used to determine whether a person is eligible for the Boiler Replacement Scheme, to include people who are in receipt of Housing Benefit.

(AQW 2355/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Boiler Replacement Scheme is a pilot scheme targeted at owner occupiers or private tenants on low income who miss out on other Government energy efficiency improvement schemes such as the Warm Homes Scheme which is available to people who receive Housing Benefit. All potential Boiler Replacement Scheme beneficiaries have been identified and have been contacted by leaflet and this has resulted in over 300 successful applications.

I have now extended the pilot scheme to lone householders aged 70 and over who receive Lone Pensioner Allowance and have a boiler aged 15 years or older.

Crime Lock Out Scheme

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development whether he plans to initiate the Crime Lock Out Scheme for pensioners in the North Down area.

(AQW 2364/11-15)

Mr McCausland: During the period April 2004 to August 2007 the Housing Executive delivered the Lock Out Crime Scheme across Northern Ireland. That scheme was funded by the Northern Ireland Office and provided home security measures, irrespective of tenure, to households over the age of 65 years of age with a housing benefit or rates rebate entitlement.

There have been a number of previous requests asking for the scheme to be reintroduced. The Department of Justice has given no indication that it intends to do so.

Housing Executive: Winter Weather

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of the aftermath of last year's adverse winter weather conditions, what action the Housing Executive is taking to mitigate similar problems this winter.

(AQO 396/11-15)

Mr McCausland: A considerable amount of work has been undertaken to ensure that both Housing Executive staff and their Contractors will be in a position to respond effectively and speedily if there are severe weather conditions this winter.

The Housing Executive has advised that the following plans have been put in place:

- Enhanced their pool of staff resources willing and able to respond to an emergency across the province;
- Reviewed the "triggers" which provide pre warning of a potential emergency-such as volume of calls coming in to their Customer Services Units and the number of calls not being answered
- Reviewed all emergency plans at District, Area and Central level and put in place a formal annual review procedure;
- Reviewed all of the All Trades and Heating Contractor Emergency/ Contingency plans and put in place a formal annual review procedure;
- Put in place priority call handling ("silver numbers") for use by emergency services, public representatives and community representatives;
- Carried out tests of plans and procedures in three Housing Executive Areas, involving Area and District staff, Contractors and Community Representatives; these were successful but all involved learned small lessons from putting the theory into practice.
- Identified a range of technical improvements (particularly in relation to boilers/heating) and included these in ongoing work, for example, relocating gas condensate pipes internally, providing a frost stat (which will trigger the pump to circulate water around the system) at each new oil heating installation, etc;
- Agreed a menu of services including, sharing mobile contact numbers, opening Community facilities, assisting in identifying those who might be vulnerable, which community groups might provide - to be agreed locally (at District Office level) during September;
- Developed a series of information pages which can be activated at short notice on their web, dependant on the type of emergency, to provide clear advice and guidance to tenants.

Urban Regeneration: Belfast

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has for the further development of urban regeneration in Belfast.

(AQO 388/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Urban Regeneration in Belfast will continue to be delivered through current programmes in a way that maximises regeneration outcomes in our most deprived areas and reflects our budget allocation.

My Department will continue with the implementation of the Neighbourhood Renewal programme across Belfast, working with communities in identifying local social, community, economic and physical priorities, and where the resource is available, funding community-based collaborative services that address priority needs. We also aim to better align the priorities identified in local Neighbourhood Action Plans, the Strategic Regeneration Frameworks and both existing Government and Council priorities, so as to provide a Belfast wide response to the regeneration of the City.

My Department will also continue with:

- Urban Development Grants which encourage private sector property development.
- Comprehensive Development Schemes which promote the regeneration of certain areas.
- Public Realm/Environmental Improvements which improve the visual appearance of an area.
- Masterplanning exercises which provide a framework for development of specific target areas to maximise economic and physical regeneration, deliver social benefits, and address planning and infrastructure constraints.
- My Department aims to build on the major transformation of Belfast City Centre over the past 15 years which has delivered over £1.5 billion of private and public investment at Laganside, Victoria Square and in the renewal of the main shopping streets.
- We will continue to take forward the implementation of our regeneration plans for Royal Exchange and the Northside and Westside of the city centre against the background of the squeeze on both public and private sources of investment.
- My officials are considering ways in which regeneration can be delivered by drawing upon forms of investment other than capital government funding.

Urban Regeneration: Fermanagh and South Tyrone

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development which towns in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency will be eligible for Urban Renewal grants.

(AQO 389/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Any settlement which has been designated as urban by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency is eligible for Urban Development Grants and other urban renewal programmes provided by my Department. In Fermanagh South Tyrone, the towns of Dungannon, Enniskillen and Coalisland are eligible for that support.

Universal Credit

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development to outline how Universal Credit will achieve its aims in view of the increasing levels of unemployment.

(AQO 390/11-15)

Mr McCausland: It is intended that Universal Credit will be introduced from October 2013, subject to the necessary legislation process. Universal Credit will represent a major reform of welfare provision for working age customers.

Universal Credit will replace several existing in and out of work benefits and should make the benefit system less complex by simplifying the interaction between entitlement and earnings. By making the transition from out of work to in work easier, it should both encourage more people to enter employment and lead to an increase in the take-up of benefits amongst those who are eligible.

A key aim of Universal Credit is to make sure work pays by ensuring that claimants are better off in work than on benefits. This will be achieved by more generous disregards and a single constant tapered withdrawal at which benefit is reduced as income increases. Together, these measures will help to tackle the problem of worklessness in our society.

Universal Credit will ensure that contribution and responsibility are rewarded, not worklessness. The Mandated Work Element of Universal Credit will re-acquaint (or in some cases introduce) the long-term unemployed to the idea of work being an essential part of life.

I recognise the economic downturn presents a challenge in generating sufficient opportunities to facilitate the move into employment of many Universal Credit claimants however, it is clear a step change is needed if we are to address long term unemployment.

This is the first time in generations that government has sought to fully address this issue. I am keen to undertake the essential preparatory work now recognising that Universal Credit will not be introduced for new claimants until October 2013 with existing claimants moving to the new benefits by 2017. This lead in phase provides a period of time for the economic climate to improve and I am working with Executive colleagues to ensure that the impact of welfare reform on the new Economic Strategy for the Province is fully understood. In parallel, the Minister for Employment and Learning is considering whether a form of the Work Programme to assist employment uptake should be introduced to Northern Ireland by April 2013.

Boiler Replacement Scheme

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the likely impact of the pilot Boiler Replacement Scheme on the most vulnerable people, particularly the elderly.

(AQO 391/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My department launched the pilot Boiler Replacement Scheme in June 2011. The rationale for the pilot Boiler Replacement Scheme is to offer assistance to a small group of older householders on low income who missed out on other energy efficiency improvement Government schemes such as the Warm Homes Scheme. A grant of £1,500 is available to approximately 1,330 eligible households. Once completed, the pilot scheme will be subject to a full evaluation to determine its effectiveness in tackling fuel poverty.

Winter Fuel Payments

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Social Development whether his Department has considered extending the Winter Fuel Payment to other vulnerable groups such as people with long-term health problems and families with children.

(AQO 392/11-15)

Mr McCausland: As the Member will know, the Winter Fuel Payments scheme in Northern Ireland operates in parity with the scheme in Great Britain and the eligibility conditions and rates of benefit are the same. There are no plans to extend the scheme to include other groups such as those with long-term health problems or families with children.

Any decision to extend eligibility in Northern Ireland only would have to be funded out of the Northern Ireland Block and compete with other priorities within the Executive's budget.

A range of social security benefits provides help to people suffering from illness or disability, including Disability Living Allowance, Attendance Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance. Support is available to families through Child Benefit and the tax credit system which are the responsibility of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

Social Housing

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the availability and quality of social housing.

(AQO 393/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Each year we make an average 8,000 allocations in line with the Common Selection Scheme to those in need of housing. These allocations come from our current stock of 120,600

homes and are supplemented each year from the new homes delivered through the new build programme. In respect of the quality of these homes, in 2008 Savills, a renowned land and property consultancy carried out an independent assessment of the Housing Executive's stock. They concluded that their stock was by far the best they have ever inspected across the UK and this is supported by the findings of the House Condition Survey in 2009 that highlighted an overall unfitness rate of only 0.1% across social homes in Northern Ireland.

However, I recognise that there are small pockets of housing that must be improved and I have asked the Housing Executive to bring forward a strategy to tackle this poor housing.

DSD: Review

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Social Development if he intends to carry out a review of his Department in the near future.

(AQO 394/11-15)

Mr McCausland: PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) have recently completed an independent report on the Review of the Housing Executive. I have requested that PwC now seek feedback on their recommendations from key stakeholders. These are scheduled to be completed by the end of September 2011. Following this I will consider the implications for my Department and make informed decisions on the best way forward based on the wide range of competing funding and strategic priorities.

Environmental Improvement Scheme: Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the Environmental Improvement Scheme for Carrickfergus.

(AQO 395/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I am glad to advise that there has been good progress on the Carrickfergus Town Centre Environmental Improvement Scheme. I have approved the Department's funding contribution to the project and work is currently underway to appoint contractors for the scheme with construction planned to start in January 2012. Provision has been made for the estimated costs of the scheme in my Department's budgets for this financial year and 2012/13.

Revised Written Answers

This section contains the revised written answers to questions tabled by Members.

The content of the responses is as received at the time from the relevant Minister or representative of the Assembly Commission, and it has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process or changed.

Revised Written Answers

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Trout and Salmon Stocks

In Bound Volume 65, page WA283, replace the answer to the question (AQW 1304/11-15) asked by Mr Allister with:

Ms Ní Chuillín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Work is in progress to develop appropriate assessment tools for trout and a report is expected in early 2012. The status of adult salmon stocks on the River Maine is measured against a specific conservation limit (CL) for the river. The CL for the River Maine is expressed as the number of eggs required to seed the available accessible habitat and the annual attainment against CL from 2005-10 is outlined in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1. ATTAINMENT OF CL ON THE RIVER MAINE 2005-2010

Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
% Attainment of CL	42	96	170	68	61

DCAL works within the guidelines specified under the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966 as amended to safeguard the migratory run of salmon and trout within the Department's jurisdiction. In 2007 the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) took over the responsibility of investigating water pollution incidents and prosecuting offenders under the Water Order. DCAL works closely with the NIEA where a fish kill occurs as result of a pollution incident.

The River Maine has been surveyed annually at over 100 monitoring sites since 2002 and an annual index of recruitment has been generated to monitor trends in abundance over time. The annual fry index for the River Maine catchment is detailed in Table 2 below

TABLE 2 ANNUAL FRY INDEX RIVER MAINE

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
No Fry 5 Min	4.38	9.27	5.17	5.00	3.08	3.59	5.65	4.68	3.41

Three DCAL Fishery Protection Officers (Bailiffs) work in the Northern Area which covers the River Maine system. Fishery Protection Officers operate an On Call system from June to December to respond to reports of illegal fishing activity in the DCAL operational area. In addition, planned patrols are carried out both during the week and at weekends to detect breaches of Fisheries Legislation on the River Maine.

The former Fisheries Conservancy Board (FCB) employed 12 Fishery Protection Officers ten years ago covering the North with the exception of the Foyle and Carlingford areas, which are under the jurisdiction of the Loughs Agency. The Fishery Protection Officers worked a rota basis of 6 hours per day for 6 days a week. The former FCB employed 2 Fishery Protection Officers on the River Maine area. DCAL have 3 Fishery Protection Officers appointed to the Northern Area which includes the River Maine catchment area.

Education

Pupils from a Minority Community

In this Bound Volume, page WA23, replace the answer to the question (AQW 1619/11-15) asked by Mr Storey with:

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): The latest information available relates to the 2010/2011 school year. There are currently 42 integrated primary schools, and 20 post primary schools. Of these, 20 primary schools and 8 post primary schools do not have an intake of 30% or more from a minority community.

The tables below provide the religious breakdown of integrated schools, including the percentage of pupils from a minority community, attending each integrated school.

Religious Breakdown of Integrated Primary schools 2010/11			
School name	Protestant %	Catholic %	Other %
Cliftonville Integrated Primary School	36.6	35.29	28.34
Forge Integrated Primary School	29.84	25	45.16
Hazelwood Primary School	27.57	50.55	21.88
Cranmore Integrated Primary School	37.7	38.8	23.5
Groarty Primary School	#	70.73	*
Enniskillen Integrated Primary School	36.33	47.35	16.33
Omagh Integrated Primary School	32.94	52.82	14.24
Oakgrove Integrated Primary School	25.55	49.78	24.67
Roe Valley Integrated Primary School	26.58	58.86	14.56
Carnlough Controlled Integrated Primary School	44.68	36.17	19.15
Glengormley Integrated Primary School	22.77	43.07	34.16
Crumlin Primary School	63.74	11.7	24.56
Ballymoney Controlled Integrated Primary School	74.53	4.87	20.6
Carhill Integrated Primary School	46.15	26.92	26.92
Ballycastle Integrated Primary School	37.01	40.26	22.73
Rathenraw Integrated Primary School	36.36	36.36	27.27
Round Tower Integrated Primary School	35.82	27.24	36.94
Millstrant Integrated Primary School	41.97	37.82	20.21
Braidside Integrated Primary School	38.27	39.11	22.63
Corran Integrated Primary School	34.45	42.11	23.44
Acorn Integrated Primary School	50.88	36.84	12.28
Spires Integrated Primary School	35.32	34.33	30.35
Maine Integrated Primary School	32.11	37.61	30.28
Kircubbin Primary School	47.41	31.9	20.69

Religious Breakdown of Integrated Primary schools 2010/11			
School name	Protestant %	Catholic %	Other %
Portaferry Integrated Primary School	22.81	54.39	22.81
Bangor Central Primary School	57.34	14.16	28.5
Annsborough Primary School	#	47.37	*
Glencraig Integrated Primary School	59.73	18.14	22.12
Fort Hill Integrated Primary School	72.41	5.6	21.98
All Childrens Integrated Primary School	26.64	58.88	14.49
Loughview Integrated Primary School	40.75	33.02	26.23
Cedar Integrated Primary School	32.72	43.32	23.96
Oakwood Integrated Primary School	37.75	38.73	23.53
Millennium Integrated Primary School	32.59	45.09	22.32
Drumlins Integrated Primary School	39.66	35.34	25
Rowandale Integrated Primary School	18.63	43.14	38.24
Kilbroney Integrated Primary School	21.98	58.24	19.78
Bridge Integrated Primary School	37.84	47.17	14.99
Portadown Integrated Primary School	24.14	32.33	43.53
Windmill Integrated Primary School	31.44	44.98	23.58
Saints & Scholars Int Primary School	27.43	39.66	32.91
Phoenix Integrated Primary School	33.56	52.35	14.09
Total	39	37.24	24.18

Note:

- 1 Primary includes nursery, reception and year 1 - 7 classes.
 - 2 Integrated schools includes 'Controlled integrated' and 'Grant maintained integrated'
- * relates to fewer than 5 pupils.
- # means a figure relating to 5 or more pupils has been treated to prevent disclosure.

Religious breakdown of Integrated post primary schools 2010/11			
School name	Protestant %	Catholic %	Other%
Hazelwood College	48.38	31.9	19.72
Malone Integrated College	41.33	45.73	12.93
Oakgrove Integrated College	30.8	67.33	1.87
Erne Integrated College	37.38	49.05	13.57
Drumragh College	28.4	58.8	12.81
Crumlin Integrated College	36.36	37.23	26.41
Parkhall Integrated College	81.38	2.64	15.98

Religious breakdown of Integrated post primary schools 2010/11			
School name	Protestant %	Catholic %	Other%
Slemish College	43.69	33.47	22.84
North Coast Integrated College	57.69	21.66	20.65
Ulidia Integrated College	54.48	33.96	11.57
Sperrin Integrated College	43.24	44.49	12.27
Priory College	73.6	12.27	14.14
Fort Hill College	73.33	8.59	18.08
Lagan College	42.5	36.61	20.89
Shimna Integrated College	31.43	49.14	19.43
Strangford Integrated College	52.04	25.44	22.52
Blackwater Integrated College	59.28	29.94	10.78
Brownlow Int College	33.41	51.09	15.5
New-Bridge Integrated College	43.88	46.52	9.6
Integrated College Dungannon	29.16	58.93	11.91
Total	47.53	36.79	15.69

Employment and Learning

Stranmillis University College

In Bound Volume 65, page WA191, replace the answer to the question (AQW 939/11-15) asked by Mr Easton with:

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): In June this year you raised a written Assembly question (AQW 939/11-15) which asked “whether Stranmillis University College has been within budget in each of the last three years”. I answered the question using information supplied by Stranmillis University College. For the 2009/10 academic year my reply stated that the College had an actual surplus of £891,000. However, this figure is incorrect as the College’s audited financial statements for the year report a surplus of £870,000, some £21,000 lower than the College reported to my officials when the answer was being prepared.

The impact of this was that I went on to state that the adjusted surplus for the year would have been £23,000 had conversion funding and a pension credit been excluded from the College’s reported surplus figure. Using the correct surplus figure would give an adjusted surplus of £2,000 as opposed to £23,000.

I apologise for the error and I would stress that the figures reported in the original answer were provided in good faith on the basis of information provided by the College.

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 12 September 2011

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

2.1 Royal Assent

The Speaker informed Members that Royal Assent had been signified on 25 July 2011 to the Budget (No.2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 and the Damages (Asbestos-related Conditions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement - North South Ministerial Council Meeting in Trade and Business Development Sectoral Format

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mrs Arlene Foster, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council meeting in Trade and Business Development sectoral format, following which she replied to questions.

3.2 Statement - North South Ministerial Council Meeting in Special EU Programmes Sectoral Format

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council meeting in Special EU Programmes sectoral format, following which he replied to questions.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

3.3 Statement - The Future Policy on Higher Education and Student Finance Arrangements

The Minister for Employment and Learning, Dr Stephen Farry, made a statement regarding the Future Policy on Higher Education and Student Finance Arrangements, following which he replied to questions.

4. Committee Business

4.1 Motion - Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Paul Maskey replace Ms Caitríona Ruane as a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel; that Mr Oliver McMullan replace Mr Gerry Kelly as a member of the Committee

for Culture, Arts and Leisure; and that Mr Pat Doherty replace Mr Paul Maskey as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

Ms J McCann

The Question being put, the Motion was carried without division.

5. Private Members' Business

5.1 Motion - Green Economy

Proposed:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to make the development of the green economy a priority within the next Programme for Government and to affirm that an overarching strategy for the development of the green economy should be implemented; and further calls on the Executive to bring together existing policies and initiatives, to identify gaps and to address them.

Ms A Lo

Mr C Lyttle

Mr T Lunn

Debate ensued.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

6. Question Time

6.1 Regional Development

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Regional Development, Mr Danny Kennedy.

6.2 Employment and Learning

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Employment and Learning, Dr Stephen Farry.

7. Private Members' Business (Cont'd)

7.1 Motion - Green Economy (Cont'd)

Debate resumed on the Motion.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

7.2 Motion - Londonderry Railway Line

Proposed:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Regional Development to ensure the future of the Londonderry Railway Line which links Coleraine with Londonderry and which connects the east and west of Northern Ireland.

Mr G Campbell

Mr A McQuillan

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

8. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.54pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

12 September 2011

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 29 June - 12 September 2011

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - Damages (Asbestos-related Conditions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011
 - Budget (No.2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - Council for Healthcare Regulatory Excellence Annual Report and Accounts 2010-2011 (DHSSPS)
 - Council for Healthcare Regulatory Excellence Performance and Review Report 2010-2011 (DHSSPS)
 - Council for Catholic Maintained Schools Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011 (CCMS)
 - Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011 (DFP)
 - Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal Services Annual Report and Accounts 2010-2011 (DOJ)
 - Northern Ireland Ambulance Service Health and Social Care Trust Annual Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011 (DHSSPS)
 - Public Health Agency Annual Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011 (DHSSPS)
 - The Planning Service Annual Report and Accounts 2010-2011 (DOE)
 - Northern Ireland Environment Agency Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011 (DOE)
 - Forensic Science Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts 2010-2011 (DOJ)
 - Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Ombudsman Annual Report 2010-2011 (DOJ)
 - The Compensation Agency Annual Report and Accounts 2010-2011 (DOJ)
 - Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 27 March 2011 (DRD)
 - Financial Reporting Advisory Board Annual Report 2010-2011 (DFP)
 - Invest Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts 2010-11 (DETI)
 - Police Service of Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011 (DOJ)
 - Police Service of Northern Ireland Accounts for the Police Property Fund for the year ended 31 March 2011 (DOJ)

- Police Service of Northern Ireland Police Pension Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011 (DOJ)
- Police Service of Northern Ireland Accounts for the Police Fund for the year ended 31 March 2011 (DOJ)
- Northern Ireland Prison Service Annual Report and Accounts 2010-11 (DOJ)
- Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment Annual Report and Accounts for 2009/10 (DE)
- Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment Annual Report and Accounts for 2010/11 (DE)
- Labour Relations Agency Annual Report and Accounts 2010/2011 (DEL)
- Probation Board for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts 2010/11 (DOJ)
- Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland Annual Report 2010/11 (DOJ)
- Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Statement of Accounts 2010/11 (DETI)
- Youth Council for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts 2010/11 (DE)
- Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2011 (DFP)
- Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2011 (DFP)
- Department for Employment and Learning Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2011 (DFP)
- Department of Finance and Personnel Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2011 (DFP)
- Department of Finance and Personnel – Superannuation and other Allowances Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2011 (DFP)
- Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2011 (DFP)
- Department of the Environment Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2011 (DFP)
- Food Standards Agency Resource Accounts 2010/11 (DFP)
- Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2011 (DFP)
- Department of Education - Teachers Superannuation Scheme (DFP)
- Northern Ireland Audit Office Resource Accounts 2010/11 (DFP)
- Resource Accounts of the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints 2010-2011 (DFP)
- Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation Resource Accounts 2010/11 (DFP)
- Department for Social Development Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2011 (DFP)
- The Northern Ireland Assembly Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2011 (DFP)

- Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2011 (DFP)
- HSC Pension Scheme Resource Accounts 2010/11 (DFP)
- Department of Justice Resource Accounts for the Year Ended 2011 (DFP)
- Northern Ireland Law Commission - Report on Vulnerable Witnesses in Civil Proceedings (DOJ)
- Youth Justice Agency Annual Report and Accounts 2010/11 (DOJ)
- Criminal Justice Inspection Annual Report 2010/11 (DOJ)
- Social Security Agency Annual Report and Accounts 2010/11 (DSD)
- Driver and Vehicle Agency Annual Report and Statement of Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2011 (DOE)
- Land and Property Services Annual Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2011 (DFP)
- Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts For the year ended 31 March 2011 (DOJ)
- Forensic Science Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts 2010-2011 (DOJ)
- Health Protection Agency Annual Report and Accounts 2010-2011 (DHSSPS)
- Northern Health and Social Care Trust Annual Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011 (DHSSPS)
- Health and Social Care Board Annual Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011 (DHSSPS)
- The General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011 (DETI)
- Charities Annual Report 2002 (DSD)
- Charities Annual Report 2003 (DSD)
- Charities Annual Report 2004 (DSD)
- Charities Annual Report 2005 (DSD)
- Western Health and Social Care Trust Annual Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011 (DHSSPS)
- Agricultural and Horticultural Development Board Annual Report and Accounts 2010/11 (DARD)
- Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service Management Statement and Financial Memorandum (DHSSPS)
- Review, Retention and Disposal Schedule for the Police Service of Northern Ireland (DCAL)
- Northern Ireland Housing Executive Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011 (NIHE)
- Security Industry Authority (SIA) – Annual Report and Accounts 2010/11 (DOJ)
- Arts Council of Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011 (DCAL)
- Serious Organised Crime Agency Annual Report and Accounts 2010/11 (DOJ)

- Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Resource Accounts 2010-11 (DFP)
- UK Statistics Authority Annual Report and Accounts 2010/11 (DFP)
- Northern Ireland Geographic Information Strategy 2009-2019 - "Effectively Using Information on Location" Annual Report 2010-11 (DFP)
- Consultation Document – Proposals for a Charge on Single Use Carrier Bags (DOE)
- Youth Diversion – A Thematic Inspection of Youth Diversion in the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland (Criminal Justice Inspection NI)
- Northern Ireland Water Annual Report and Accounts for Year Ended March 2011 (DRD)
- Food Safety Promotion Board Annual Report 2009 (DHSSPS)
- Minute on the Direction of Accruing Resources (DFP)
- Police Service of Northern Ireland Annual Report of the Chief Constable 2010-2011 (DOJ)
- Commission for Victims and Survivors Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2010 (OFMDFM)
- Annual Statements Required by the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons (Northern Ireland) Act 1978 and Report Required by the Disabled Persons (Northern Ireland) Act 1989 (DHSSPS)
- Public Prosecution Service (NI) - Annual Report and Resource Accounts 2010-11 (PPSNI)
- NI Guardian Ad Litem Agency Annual Report & Accounts 2010-2011 (DHSSPS)
- The Patient and Client Council Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011 (DHSSPS)
- Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute Annual Report and Accounts 2009/2010 (DARD)
- Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority Annual Report and Accounts for Year Ended 31 March 2011 (DHSSPS)
- Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency Annual Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011 (DHSSPS)
- Annual Report and Accounts of the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NI Audit Office)
- Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service Annual Report and Statement of Accounts 2010/11 (DHSSPS)
- Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division Annual Report on Decision Making 2010/11 (DSD)
- Governance Inspection of the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland (DOJ)
- Northern Ireland Housing Executive Annual Report 2010/11 (DSD)
- An Inspection into the independence of the Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland (DOJ)
- Northern Ireland Central Investment Fund for Charities Annual Report to 30 September 2010 (DSD)
- Charitable Donations and Bequests Annual Report to 31 March 2010 (DSD)
- Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission Annual Report and Accounts 2010-2011 (OFMDFM)

- Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service Annual Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011 (DHSSPS)

5. Assembly Reports

- Register of Members' Interests (NIA 8/11-15)

6. Statutory Rules

(The Department identified after each rule is for reference purposes only)

- S.R. 2011/232 The Waste (Fees and Charges etc.) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DOE)
- S.R. 2011/233 The Plant Health (Amendment No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DARD)
- S.R. 2011/235 The Passenger and Goods Vehicle (Community Recording Equipment Regulation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DOE)
- S.R. 2011/237 The Industrial Court (Membership) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DEL)
- S.R. 2011/238 The Chemical Analysis of Water Status (Technical Specifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DOE)
- S.R. 2011/239 The Controls on Ozone-Depleting Substances Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DOE)
- S.R. 2011/240 The Ozone-Depleting Substances (Qualifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DOE)
- S.R. 2011/247 Electricity (Published Criteria for Generating Station) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DETI)
- S.R. 2011/248 Eggs and Chicks (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DARD)
- S.R. 2011/249 The Industrial Training Levy (Construction Industry) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DEL)
- S.R. 2011/256 The Health and Personal Social Services (Superannuation), Health and Social Care (Pension Scheme) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DHSSPS)
- S.R. 2011/261 Railways (Safety Management) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/262 The Further Education (Student Support) (Eligibility) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DEL)
- S.R. 2011/264 The Charities (Interim Manager) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DSD)
- S.R. 2011/265 The Employment and Support Allowance (Work-Related Activity) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DSD)
- S.R. 2011/275 The Eskragh Road (U1104), Granville, Dungannon (Stopping-Up) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/276 The Disert Road, Draperstown (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/277 The Additional Statutory Paternity Pay (General) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DEL)
- S.R. 2011/278 The Dogs (Fixed Penalty) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DARD)

- S.R. 2011/279 The Dogs (Licensing and Identification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DARD)
- S.R. 2011/280 The Occupational Pension Schemes (Assignment, Forfeiture, Bankruptcy, Etc.) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DSD)
- S.R. 2011/281 The Dogs (Amendment) (2011 Act) (Commencement No. 1) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DARD)
- S.R. 2011/283 The Factories Act (Northern Ireland) 1965 and Office and Shop Premises Act (Northern Ireland) 1966 (Repeals and Modifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DETI)
- S.R. 2011/284 The Extraction Solvents in Food (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DHSSPS)
- S.R. 2011/287 The Road Traffic (Fixed Penalty) (Offences) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DOE)
- S.R. 2011/288 The Road Traffic (Fixed Penalty) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DOE)
- S.R. 2011/289 The Radioactive Substances Exemption (Northern Ireland) Order 2011 (DOE)
- S.R. 2011/290 The Radioactive Substances Act 1993 (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DOE)
- S.R. 2011/291 The Social Security (Loss of Benefit) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DSD)
- S.R. 2011/293 The Housing Benefit (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DSD)
- S.R. 2011/295 Plant Protection Products Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DARD)
- S.R. 2011/296 The Social Security (Exemption from Claiming Retirement Pension) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DSD)
- S.R. 2011/297 The Foyle Area (Angling Remits) Regulations 2011 (DARD)
- S.R. 2011/298 The Social Security (Electronic Communications) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DSD)
- S.R. 2011/305 The Occupational Pension Schemes (Contracting-out) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DSD)

For Information Only:

- S.R. 2011/222 (C.13) (C.13) The Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 (Commencement and Transitional Provision) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DEL)
- S.R. 2011/246 The Loading Bays on Roads (Amendment No.4) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 250/250 The Road Races (Ulster Grand Prix Bike Week) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/251 The Road Races (Mid-Antrim 150) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/252 The Road Races (Garron Point Hill Climb) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/253 The Parking Places on Roads (Lisburn) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)

- S.R. 2011/254 The Prohibition of Right-Hand Turn (Enniskillen) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/255 The One-Way Traffic (Ballymoney) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/257 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Moy) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/258 The Animal By-Products (Enforcement) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DARD)
- S.R. 2011/260 The Welfare Reform (2007 Act) (Commencement No.9) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DSD)
- S.R. 2011/266 The Road Races (Ulster Rally) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/267 The Parking Places on Roads (Newry) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/268 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Irvinestown) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/269 The Prohibition of Traffic (North Belfast) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/270 The Prohibition of Traffic (Ardoyne, Belfast) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/271 The Road Races (Spelga Hill Climb) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011(DRD)
- S.R. 2011/272 The Road Races (Croft Hill Climb) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/273 The Parking Spaces (Disabled Persons' Vehicles) (Amendment No.6) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011(DRD)
- S.R. 2011/274 The Parking Places (Disabled Persons' Vehicles) (Amendment No.7) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/282 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Belfast) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/285 (C.20) The Wildlife and Natural Environment (2011 Act) (Commencement No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DOE)
- S.R. 2011/286 (C.21) The Road Traffic (2007 Order) (Commencement No.7) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DOE)
- S.R. 2011/294 The Bus Lanes (Shore Road, York Road and York Street, Belfast) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/299 The Loading Bays on Roads (Amendment No.5) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/300 The Roads (Speed Limit) (No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

- Memorandum of Understanding and Supplementary Agreements (OFMDFM)
- Reported Fish Kill at Loughbrickland Lake (DCAL)

8. Consultation Documents

- Proposed amendments to The Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 and revised guidance on the Waste Incineration Directive (DOE)
- Review of and Consultation on the Identification of Bathing Waters in Northern Ireland 2011 (DOE)
- Consultation on Fixed Penalty Notice Guidance (DOE)
- Department of Education Revised Equality Scheme and Audit of Inequalities (DE)
- A Strategy for the Allied Health Professionals in Northern Ireland (DHSSPS)
- Consultation on the Draft Welfare of Animals (Permitted Procedures by Lay Persons) Regulations (DARD)
- Consultation on the Draft Docking of Working Dogs' Tails (Certification and Identification) Regulations (DARD)
- A District Nursing Service for Today and Tomorrow (DHSSPS)
- Cattle Identification (Notification of Births, Deaths and Movements) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DARD)
- Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DARD)
- Welfare of Animals (Slaughter and Killing) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DARD)
- Phase 2 Consultation on Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DFP)
- Consultation on Equality Impact Assessment Reform of Bail Law and Practice in Northern Ireland (NI Law Commission)
- Consultation on the Electricity Safety, Quality and Continuity Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DETI)
- Taxis Act (NI) 2008 Taxi Licence and Powers of Seizure Proposals for Public Consultation (DOE)
- Taxis Act (NI) 2008 Wedding and Courtesy Transport Proposals for Public Consultation (DOE)
- Fine Default in Northern Ireland: A Department of Justice Consultation (DOJ)
- Consultation on the Development of the Northern Ireland renewable Heat Incentive (DETI)
- Developing Eyecare Partnerships, Improving Eyecare Provision in Northern Ireland (DHSSPS)
- Consultation on an Addendum and Delivery Programme to the NI Waste Management Strategy 2006-2020 (DOE)
- Public Consultation: Housing Benefit Reform – Supported Housing (DSD/DWP)
- Estate Management Strategy 2011-2021 (DARD)
- Consultation Paper on Noise and Statutory Nuisances (DOE)
- Welfare Reform Bill (Northern Ireland) 2011 Equality Impact Assessment Consultation (DSD)

9. Departmental Publications

- Memorandum of Understanding and Supplementary Agreements (OFMDFM)
- Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust (PRRT) Annual Report and Accounts 2010-11 (DOJ)

- Industrial Injuries Advisory Council Annual Report 2010-11 (DSD)
- The use of locum doctors by Northern Ireland Hospitals (NIAO)
- Equality Statistics for the Northern Ireland Civil Service (DFP)
- Population and Migration Estimates Northern Ireland (2010) - Statistical Report (DFP)
- Planning Policy Statement 12: Housing in Settlements - Draft Policy HS 3 (Amended) Travellers Accommodation (DOE)
- Criminal Cases Review Commission Annual Report and Accounts 2010/11 (DOJ)
- Forest Service Business Plan 2011/12 (DARD)
- Government's Response to the Consultation on - Strengthening families, promoting parental responsibility: the future of child maintenance (DSD)
- The Price of being Poor- The Consumer Council (DOJ)
- A state pension for the 21st century: A summary of responses to the public consultation (DSD)
- Proposals for a Pensions Bill - Equality Impact Assessment (DSD)
- Skin Cancer Prevention Strategy & Action Plan 2011-2021 (DHSSPS)
- Ministerial Response to "The Agency Workers Directive - A Public Consultation 2010" (DEL)
- The Consumer Council-Consumer Manifesto July 2011 (DETI)
- Northern Ireland Ambulance Service Trust Annual Accounts Year Ended 31 March 2011 (DHSSPS)
- Health and Social Care Board Annual Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011 (DHSSPS)
- Forest Service Annual Report for 2011/2012 (DARD)
- Tourism Ireland Annual Report 2010 (DETI)
- InterTradelreland: Annual Review of Activities and Annual Accounts 2010 (DETI)

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

- European Union Act 2011- Chapter 12
- Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Act 2011-Chapter 10
- Wreck Removal Convention Act 2011- Chapter 8
- Finance Act 2011- Chapter 11
- National Heritage Memorial Fund Lottery Distribution Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011 (HOC)
- National Heritage Memorial Fund Report and Accounts 2010-2011 (HOC)

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 13 September 2011

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Executive Committee Business

2.1 North South Ministerial Council Meeting in Language Body Sectoral Format

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council meeting in Language Body sectoral format, following which she replied to questions.

2.2 North South Ministerial Council Meeting in Inland Waterways Sectoral Format

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council meeting in Inland Waterways sectoral format, following which she replied to questions.

2.3 Access to Justice Review

The Minister of Justice, Mr David Ford, made a statement regarding the Access to Justice Review, following which he replied to questions.

2.4 Department for Regional Development Key Issues

The Minister for Regional Development, Mr Danny Kennedy, made a statement regarding Key Issues in his Department, following which he replied to questions.

The sitting was suspended at 12.26pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) in the Chair.

3. Question Time

3.1 Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mrs Arlene Foster.

3.2 Environment

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of the Environment, Mr Alex Attwood.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

4. Executive Committee Business (Cont'd)

4.1 Statement - Changes to Accident and Emergency Service Configuration in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Edwin Poots, made a statement regarding the Changes to Accident and Emergency Service Configuration in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, following which he replied to questions.

5. Private Members' Business

5.1 Motion - Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme - Security Breach

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes with regret the deduction of National Insurance and Income Tax from the £20 million Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme; expresses concern at the security breach which put the identity and well-being of around 6000 former part-time RUC Officers at risk; and calls on the Minister of Justice to make a statement on the matter and detail what action has been taken in light of the security breach.

*Mr R Hussey
Mr B McCrea
Mr M Copeland*

Debate ensued.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** (Division 1).

6. Adjournment

Mr Conall McDevitt spoke to his topic on the Proposals to Close Belfast City Hospital's Accident and Emergency Unit.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 6.09pm.

Mr William Hay
The Speaker

13 September 2011

Northern Ireland Assembly

13 September 2011

Divisions

Division No. 1

Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme - Security Breach - Motion

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes with regret the deduction of National Insurance and Income Tax from the £20 million Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme; expresses concern at the security breach which put the identity and well-being of around 6000 former part-time RUC Officers at risk; and calls on the Minister of Justice to make a statement on the matter and detail what action has been taken in light of the security breach.

Mr R Hussey
Mr B McCrea
Mr M Copeland

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 54
Noes: 23

Ayes

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Attwood, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Byrne, Mr T Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mrs Lewis, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McQuillan, Mr A Maginness, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Hussey and Mr Kinahan.

Noes

Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr W Clarke, Mr Flanagan, Ms Gildernew, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr F McCann and Ms S Ramsey.

The Motion was **carried**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 13 September 2011

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - The Northern Ireland Social Security Agency Social Fund Account for the year ended 31 March 2009 (NIAO)
 - The Northern Ireland Social Security Agency Social Fund Account for the year ended 31 March 2010 (NIAO)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 19 September 2011

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Assembly Business

2.1 Designation of Acting deputy First Minister

The Speaker informed Members that he had received a letter from the deputy First Minister, Mr Martin McGuinness, advising that under section 16A (11) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, he has designated the Minister of Education, Mr John O'Dowd, to exercise the functions of the office of deputy First Minister, effective from Tuesday 20 September 2011.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 North South Ministerial Council Meeting in Environment Sectoral Format

The Minister of the Environment, Mr Alex Attwood, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council meeting in Environment sectoral format, following which he replied to questions.

4. Private Members' Business

4.1 Motion - Fuel Poverty

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the serious problem of fuel poverty, especially amongst older people; acknowledges the adverse impact that rising fuel bills are likely to have on the ability of older people to keep warm and healthy; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to make representations to Her Majesty's Government to continue to support Age Sector Platform's call to maintain this year's winter fuel payment at its current level of £250 for pensioner households where someone is aged between 60 and 79, and £400 where someone is aged 80 and over.

Mr D McIlveen

Mr P Frew

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

4.2 Amendment

Proposed:

At end insert:

‘; and further calls on the Minister to increase funding for the Green New Deal to provide the energy efficiency measures required to tackle fuel poverty in the long-term.’

Mr S Agnew

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made** without division.

The Question being put, the Motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

5. Question Time

5.1 Finance and Personnel

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson.

5.2 Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Edwin Poots.

The Speaker took the Chair.

6. Private Members’ Business (Cont’d)

6.1 Motion - Restoration of Confidence in the Office of the Police Ombudsman

Proposed:

That this Assembly welcomes the Criminal Justice Inspection report into the Office of the Police Ombudsman; and calls on the Minister of Justice to take the necessary measures to ensure that full confidence is restored in the Office.

Mr R McCartney

Ms J McCann

Mr G Kelly

6.2 Amendment No. 1

Proposed:

Leave out all after ‘Ombudsman’ and insert:

‘; notes the damage caused to the Office by the investigation of historic cases; and calls upon the Minister of Justice to permanently suspend any new historic investigations by the Office of the Police Ombudsman and bring forward proposals to create public and police confidence in the Ombudsman’s office, including independent oversight.’

Mr P Weir

Mr J Wells

Mr S Anderson

6.3 Amendment No. 2

Proposed:

At end insert:

‘; and further calls on the current Police Ombudsman to resign with immediate effect.’

Mr C McDevitt

Mr A Maginness

Debate ensued.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

Amendment No. 1 being put, the Amendment was **made** (Division 1)

Amendment No. 2 being put, the Amendment **fell** (Division 2)

The Question being put, the Motion, as amended, was **carried** (Division 3).

7. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.55pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

19 September 2011

Northern Ireland Assembly

19 September 2011

Divisions

Division No. 1

Restoration of Confidence in the Office of the Police Ombudsman - Amendment 1

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'Ombudsman' and insert:

'; notes the damage caused to the Office by the investigation of historic cases; and calls upon the Minister of Justice to permanently suspend any new historic investigations by the Office of the Police Ombudsman and bring forward proposals to create public and police confidence in the Ombudsman's office, including independent oversight.'

Mr P Weir

Mr J Wells

Mr S Anderson

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 47

Noes: 44

Ayes

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mrs Lewis, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Rt Hon P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Craig and Mr McQuillan.

Noes

Mr Agnew, Ms M Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr W Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Gildernew, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr Murphy, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McCartney and Mr McMullan.

The Amendment was **made**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

19 September 2011

Divisions

Division No. 2

Restoration of Confidence in the Office of the Police Ombudsman - Amendment 2

Proposed:

At end insert:

‘; and further calls on the current Police Ombudsman to resign with immediate effect.’

Mr C McDevitt

Mr A Maginness

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 38

Noes: 53

Ayes

Mr Agnew, Ms M Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Gildernew, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr Murphy, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O’Dowd, Mrs O’Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Durkan and Mr Eastwood.

Noes

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mrs Lewis, Mr Lunn, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Rt Hon P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Craig and Mr McQuillan.

The Amendment fell.

Northern Ireland Assembly

19 September 2011

Divisions

Division No. 3

Restoration of Confidence in the Office of the Police Ombudsman - Motion as amended

Proposed:

That this Assembly welcomes the Criminal Justice Inspection report into the Office of the Police Ombudsman; notes the damage caused to the Office by the investigation of historic cases; and calls upon the Minister of Justice to permanently suspend any new historic investigations by the Office of the Police Ombudsman and bring forward proposals to create public and police confidence in the Ombudsman's office, including independent oversight.

The Question, as amended, was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 47

Noes: 44

Ayes

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mrs Lewis, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Rt Hon P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Craig and Mr McQuillan.

Noes

Mr Agnew, Ms M Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr W Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Gildernew, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr Murphy, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McCartney and Mr McMullan.

The Motion, as amended, was **carried**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 14 - 19 September 2011

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - Department of Education Resource Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011 (DFP)
 - National Museums Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts 2009-2010 (DCAL)
 - An Independent Review of the Work Capability Assessment for Northern Ireland (DSD)
 - InterTradelreland: Annual Review of Activities and Annual Accounts 2010 (DETI)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules

(The Department identified after each rule is for reference purposes only)

 - Draft S.R 2011/ The Local Government (Rates Support Grant) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DOE)
 - S.R. 2011/301 The Public Service Vehicles (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DOE)
 - S.R. 2011/302 The Public Services Vehicles (Conditions of Fitness, Equipment and Use) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DOE)
 - S.R. 2011/303 The Motor Vehicles (Construction and Use) (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DOE)
 - S.R. 2011/304 The Public Service Vehicles Accessibility (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DOE)
 - S.R. 2011/314 The Donaghadee Road, Groomspoint (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
 - S.R. 2011/320 The Healthy Start Scheme and Day Care Food Scheme (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DHSSPS)

For Information Only:

 - S.R. 2011/306 (C.22) The Local Government Finance (2011 Act) (Commencement) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DOE)
 - S.R. 2011/307 The Parking Places (Disabled Persons' Vehicles) (Amendment No.8) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)

- S.R. 2011/308 The Waiting Restrictions (Enniskillen) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/309 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Omagh) (No.2) Order (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/310 The Waiting Restrictions (Dundonald) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/311 The Control of Traffic (Bangor) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/313 The Off-Street Parking (Amendment No.3) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/316 The One-Way Traffic (Newtownabbey) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
- S.R. 2011/317 The Parking Places on Roads (Newtownabbey) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

8. Consultation Documents

- The Draft Local Government Best Value (Exclusion of Non-commercial Consideration) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 and Associated Guidance (DOE)
- Public Consultation - High Hedges Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 Draft Guidance (DOE)

9. Departmental Publications

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 20 September 2011

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Private Members' Business

2.1 Motion - Programme for Government

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises that good practice in governance is to base a budget on an up-to-date Programme for Government so that the policy initiatives can inform financial planning; notes that it is now over six months since the Assembly voted on the Executive's Budget 2011-15; further notes the significant economic change in this region since the 2008-2011 Programme for Government was published; and calls on the Executive to publish for consultation a new draft Programme for Government which adequately addresses the economic challenges in the coming years.

*Ms M Ritchie
Mr D Bradley
Mr C Eastwood*

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried without division.

The sitting was suspended at 12.33pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

3. Question Time

3.1 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Questions were put to, and answered by, the First Minister, Rt Hon Peter Robinson. The junior Minister, Mr Jonathan Bell, also answered a number of questions.

3.2 Justice

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Justice, Mr David Ford.

4. Private Members' Business (Cont'd)

4.1 Motion - Newly Qualified Teachers

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes with concern the number of newly qualified teachers leaving full-time study without employment, or with little prospect of it; and calls on the Minister of Education, in conjunction with the Minister for Employment and Learning, to address the situation.

*Mr J Craig
Mr M Storey
Mrs B Hale*

Debate ensued.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

5. Adjournment

Mr Gordon Dunne spoke to his topic on Multi-schools capital build project for Holywood.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.15pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

20 September 2011

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 20 September 2011

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee Annual Report 2010-2011 (DOE)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules

(The department identified after each rule is for reference purposes only)

For Information Only:

 - S.R. 2011/312 (C.23) The Waste and Contaminated Land (Amendment) (2011 Act) (Commencement No.1) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DOE)
 - S.R. 2011/318 The Waiting Restrictions (Newtownabbey) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
 - S.R. 2011/319 The Parking Places on Roads (Glengormley) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
 - S.R. 2011/321 The Bus Lane (Victoria Street, Belfast) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
 - S.R. 2011/322 The Parking Places, Loading Bays and Waiting Restrictions (Coleraine) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DRD)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
 - The Work Capability Assessment - A Call for Evidence: Year 2 Independent Review (DSD)

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 26 September 2011

The Assembly met at noon, the Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Executive Committee Business

2.1 Statement - North South Ministerial Council Aquaculture and Marine Sectoral Format

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Mrs Michelle O'Neill, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council meeting in Aquaculture and Marine sectoral format, held on 4 July 2011, following which she replied to questions.

2.2 Statement - North South Ministerial Council Agriculture Sectoral Format

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Mrs Michelle O'Neill, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council meeting in Agriculture sectoral format, held on 26 July 2011, following which she replied to questions.

2.3 Statement - The Next Steps for Education

The Minister of Education, Mr John O'Dowd, made a statement regarding the Next Steps for Education, following which he replied to questions.

2.4 Statement - Youth Justice Review Report

The Minister of Justice, Mr David Ford, made a statement regarding the Youth Justice Review Report, following which he replied to questions.

The Speaker took the Chair.

3. Question Time

3.1 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Questions were put to, and answered by, the acting deputy First Minister, Mr John O'Dowd. The junior Minister, Ms Martina Anderson, also answered a number of questions.

3.2 Social Development

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Social Development, Mr Nelson McCausland.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

4. Executive Committee Business (Cont'd)

4.1 Legislative Consent Motion: Protection of Freedoms Bill

Proposed:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions dealing with freedom of information contained in Part 6 of the Protection of Freedoms Bill as amended in Committee in the House of Commons.

First Minister and deputy First Minister

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

5. Committee Business

5.1 Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Mike Nesbitt replace Mrs Sandra Overend as a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister; that Mr Michael Copeland replace Mr Mike Nesbitt as a member of the Committee for Regional Development; that Mrs Sandra Overend replace Mr Mike Nesbitt as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee; and that Mrs Sandra Overend replace Mr Michael Copeland as a member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

Mr J McCallister

Mr R Swann

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

6. Private Members' Business

6.1 Motion: Energy Prices

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the severe financial pressure on families and small businesses from the recent increase in energy prices; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to liaise with the Utility Regulator and the large energy companies to ensure fair and affordable pricing for energy.

Ms J McCann

Mr P Flanagan

Mr D McKay

6.2 Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out:

'and the large energy companies'

Mr R Newton

Mr D McIlveen

Mr G Dunne

Mr S Moutray

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made** without division.

The Question being put, the Motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

7. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.21pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

26 September 2011

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 21 - 26 September 2011

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2008 (DE)
 - Northern Ireland Certification Officer for Trade Unions and Employers' Associations Annual Report 2010-2011 (DEL)
 - Disposal of Records Schedule for the Department for Social Development (PRONI)
 - Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission (NIJAC) Annual Report and Accounts 2010-2011 (OFMDFM)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules

(The Department identified after each rule is for reference purposes only)

 - S.R. 2011/315 Poultrymeat Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DARD)
 - S.R. 2011/324 Fisheries (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DCAL)
 - S.R. 2011/325 Eel Fishing (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DCAL)
 - S.R. 2011/327 The Health and Personal Social Services (General Medical Services Contracts) (Prescription of Drugs Etc) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DHSSPS)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
 - The Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
 - Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 27 September 2011

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

The Speaker made some remarks in relation to the current arrangements on the order of speaking in debates as agreed by the Business Committee.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement - Visit to the USA

The First Minister, Rt Hon Peter Robinson, made a statement regarding the Visit to the USA, following which he replied to questions.

3.2 Statement - Review of Health and Social Care Services

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Edwin Poots, made a statement regarding the Review of Health and Social Care Services, following which he replied to questions.

4. Private Members' Business

4.1 Motion: Support for Rural Businesses

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the importance of rural businesses to the local economy; and calls on the Executive to increase support for rural businesses and, in particular, to permit them to advertise on public roads and to erect directional signage.

Mr A McQuillan

Mr G Campbell

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.33pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.

5. Question Time

5.1 Agriculture and Rural Development

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Mrs Michelle O'Neill.

5.2 Culture, Arts and Leisure

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín.

6. Private Members' Business (Cont'd)

6.1 Motion: Support for Rural Businesses (Cont'd)

Debate resumed on the Motion.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

6.2 Motion: Relationship between Government and the Community and Voluntary sector

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes the invaluable contribution made by the community and voluntary sector, particularly in assisting the most vulnerable people in society; believes that where the sector provides public services, it is appropriate that it should be adequately funded for this provision and any related overhead costs; and calls upon the Minister for Social Development to ensure that there is an effective working relationship between all Executive Departments and the community and voluntary sector.

*Mr M Copeland
Mr R Beggs
Mr J McCallister*

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

7. Adjournment

Mr Barry McElduff spoke to his topic on Broadband access in Greencastle and other parts of West Tyrone.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.44pm.

Mr William Hay
The Speaker

27 September 2011

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 27 September 2011

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - Department for Regional Development Resource Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2011 (DFP)
 - Public Income and Expenditure Account for the year ended 31 March 2011 (DFP)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules

(The department identified after each rule is for reference purposes only)

 - S.R. 2011/326 Local Government (Capital Finance and Accounting) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 (DOE)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
 - Consultation on the Equality Scheme for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM)
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

